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IF MEN WERE WISE.



If Men were Wise.

A Novel.

BY

E. L. Shew.

“Happy are they who live in the dream of their own existence, and see all things in the light of their own minds; who walk by faith and hope; to whom the guiding star of their youth still shines from afar and into whom the spirit of the world has not entered! The yoke of life is to them light and supportable. The world has no hold on them. They are in it, not of it; and a dream and a glory is ever around them.”—HAZLITT.



In Three Volumes.

Vol. II.

London:

Richard Bentley & Son,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1894.

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IF MEN WERE WISE.

CHAPTER I.

THE next morning Wrayburn said to Mary, "Come out and sit in the garden. I've a lot of things on my mind that I want to talk to you about."

"I notice," she answered jestingly, "that whenever you have anything particular to say, or are greatly interested about something, you immediately make for the open air."

"Do I? A fragment of Swanneck life, I suppose," said he. "It's so much pleasanter

to be outside than inside. Here, we can sit down on this bench—rustic seat might sound better.”

He flicked off some dust and fallen leaves with his handkerchief, and picked up some little apples which the wind over-night had shaken down.

“You’re not rash enough to eat them, I expect,” he said, as he handed them to Mary.

The garden was bright with gladioli, dahlias, and picotees, and sweet with clove-pinks, mignonette, and roses. Mary was sauntering along the borders, making up a little bouquet. He came up behind and took the flowers out of her hands.

“You can finish that anon,” he said. “Come and let me say my say now.”

“Well?” Mary said inquiringly, as they sat down.

“I want to lay things straight and plain before you,” he said, “that there may be no

arrière pensée. You might fancy you are making a better marriage than you really are unless I am honest with you."

"I think I'm making a very good marriage," she answered serenely.

"I have no place I can call my own except the Swanneck place, and I couldn't ask you to live there," he went on.

"I could live there more contentedly now than formerly," she said.

"Ah, but I should like you to live happily ; not to demand a sacrifice from you as the first go-off. I am poor, and it bothers me a little that I have no profession, nor any settled position, nor even any definite views of what I intend doing when I'm married. I've come to you a regular lame dog. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with a very hand-to-mouth kind of life—for a time, anyhow. For if we are to live in England we shall find it a tight fit unless I can manage to alter things. I might read for the Bar again,

but I hate the profession. I'm certain I could never live in a constant atmosphere of attorneys and law-courts. I'm too old for the civil service, and even if I were not, it's not the sort of thing I should care to go in for ;” and he sighed.

“ I think,” said Mary, gently, “ you once told me what your income is. If it is the same still—three hundred—I don't see why you need do anything. It is quite sufficient for people with very moderate views and small pretensions.”

As she spoke the blood rushed so swiftly into Wrayburn's face that he averted it, and, stretching up his arm, he began to pull leaves from the nearest branch overhead.

“ And thereby hangs a tale,” said he. “ For some years back part of my income has been—what shall I say ?—attached, but by my own will, and for my own pleasure. You may think that, living as I did, it would be impossible to spend the whole in Swan-

neck, and that I ought to have some hundreds saved by this time. But the fact is, I have not a cent saved. I made certain arrangements that disposed of two hundred every year, and of course I spent the remainder."

Mary looked at him with a little curiosity and wonder, but asked no questions.

"Now, it's not very easy or nice to recall a gift," Wrayburn continued. "There was a cottage belonging to me in Westmoreland. It was no earthly use to me, so I gave it, for whatever length of time he needed it, to a man who seemed going to the dogs for want of a little help. He was an old tutor of mine, and his teaching was one of those things we go on being grateful for all through life. I had the greatest respect and regard for him. He had not the knack of getting on in the world, however; and he had one temptation to which he yielded. When I found he was drinking and destroying himself and his family, I felt it must be my

duty to help him. The man was losing his self-respect, and would do no good, I saw, and I knew it was because he was worried and over-weighted. So I gave him the Westmoreland cottage, and bade him in God's name live in it and try to pull himself together. On and off, I've helped him ever since."

"In other words," said Mary, "you gave him a competence that enabled him to be a drunkard with ease and comfort. I think there are more deserving charities than that."

"I did not do it from charity; I did it because I was greatly indebted to him and liked him, and felt it would be shameful in me to see him drop down to the gutter, pulling all his belongings with him, and never put out a hand to save him. He had a nice wife, and a lot of children; and I used to think of them scattered and drifting about the world until I felt there could not be a spark

of manhood in me unless I stood up and did something for them. He is not what could be called a reformed character, but he does still get pupils, and is no longer goaded to desperation. His wife manages well. She has gone in for poultry, and garden and orchard stuff, and odds and ends of that kind, poor soul! Her letters to me are sometimes quite cheerful. So, right or wrong, I've not repented; nor should I like to cease helping him until his sons are more grown and able to help him."

"Certainly not," said Mary; "having put your hand to the plough, it would be wrong for you to look back."

"Then there are two boys I'm helping to keep at school," Wrayburn began again, when he suddenly hesitated and broke off. "Mary," he said confusedly, "I want you to understand that I only mention these things in explanation of the fact that my income is so 'minished and brought low'

that upon my honour I'm almost ashamed to ask you to marry me."

Mary laughed outright. "Lawrence dear, don't talk like that," she said. "Tell me about those boys."

"It was a long time ago, before I went to Swanneck. A college friend of mine had got into some entanglement with a little servant girl, and had married her. Lots of fellows wouldn't consider marriage necessary in such a case; and I thought well of him for making her his wife, though she was in no sense his equal. Very few then knew that he was married. Afterwards he got a curacy with seventy per annum from an old paralytic, who used to be driven to church in a donkey-carriage, and be shot out behind like a load of coal at the church door. He had bought the living and camped down for good, and only that his bishop compelled him to keep a curate, he wouldn't even have done that. Well, Lansdell brought his wife

and two children to the front, and all was going on well, when the poor fellow was struck down by some fever, and died after only a week's illness. I went to see him, not with any set purpose beyond some vague idea of standing by an old chum when he was getting near the dark valley. Poor fellow! his mind was tortured with dread and anxiety for his wife and children. He saw a precipice beneath the feet of those three poor feeble creatures, over which they must inevitably fall when their only support was gone. What could I do? There was not a soul depending upon me, and at that time I had the promise of wealth. I told him to make his mind easy; I would see they did not come to grief. The mother is a linen-keeper in a London hotel; a good, steady, industrious little body she's been, too. The eldest boy is clever, they tell me, and has won some scholarship lately. He's to be a doctor."

"You are very good to trouble yourself about other people and their families in this way. But had your friends no relations who could have come to their rescue?" Mary asked.

"I believe Lansdell had. He was very well connected, but they had all cut him on account of the low marriage. Whether they were legally responsible for these children I can't say. There was no time to go looking for the right horse to put the saddle on when the man lay there dying. I appeared to be the nearest horse, so I clapped it on my own back. But I expected to have plenty of money, and never to feel this extra weight. Besides, I was young and full of conceit. *Ay de mi!*"

Mary looked up thoughtfully at the play of sunlight and shadow among the interlaced boughs. "So many people in the world need help," she said, "and somehow it always seems given to the foolish and undeserving."

“Bless my soul!” laughed Wrayburn, “which of us has not been foolish, and what is there that we can take it upon us to say we deserve? The sun rises and the rain falls alike upon the just and unjust. Why add to, or take from, a rule that seems wise and saves considerable confusion?”

“I was thinking of my own folly,” she answered, with quiet sadness. “How little do I deserve the help and sympathy I have always had!”

“Nonsense, my dear! Without it your ship must have been wrecked, and you would have perished miserably.”

Although not greatly given to caresses, he leaned over now and placed a dark, velvety crimson rose in her bright hair. Mary turned round to him with a smile.

“Why have you never worked at anything, Lawrence? You would have had so much more money.”

“Because my predecessors were kind

enough to provide me with a small slice of what the Rads call 'unearned increment.' Unless I'm mistaken, we discussed that question very early in our acquaintance."

"But you could do more good if you had more money."

"Don't you believe it, Mary; that's all nonsense. If a man can't do good, as you call it, with what he has, he need not wait for something he hasn't; for when he's got it he will still be able to find excuses."

"Well, you have shown your ability to make the most of your opportunities, and if you were rich of course you could do more."

"I doubt it. You can only do good to people to the extent of your love for them. If I were rich I might endow churches and hospitals, and build whole streets of model dwellings, and yet find I had put my money into a bag with holes. I can't love society."

"Not individually, but with a general

sort of love, as we feel a general compassion for the poor and hungry."

"I never felt any particular compassion for them."

"Oh, Lawrence!"

"I never did; nor you either; nor any one that I ever knew."

"Why, what are you saying?"

"Did you ever eat your dinner with any less appetite because you knew others were starving? I never did. You'll hear very excellent people say they have so many calls upon their purses they really cannot give more. Yet they will sit down an hour afterwards to a dinner of three or four courses. So, evidently, they felt none of this burning compassion either."

"Oh, they only use such expressions comparatively. But what about yourself?"

"I've tried to help these few people as effectually as I knew how, because I liked them and wished to help them."

He was silent for some length of time; then he said slowly, "When the twelve, and afterwards the seventy, were sent out, what were they told to take?"

Mary considered a moment. "They were not to take anything; money, food, or clothing," she said.

"And those who had two coats—what were they to do with the second?"

"Impart to those who had none."

"Looks as if the superfluous was regarded as so much hindrance, doesn't it?"

"It's so hard to know what is superfluous," she answered thoughtfully. "What is a necessary for one is a superfluity for another."

"Oh yes. I've heard a millionaire talking as if there was something decidedly rotten in the state of Denmark if a coal-heaver couldn't support himself and his family and save up for his old age out of twenty shillings a week; and that he was a positively

damnable fellow if he struck for twenty-one. The extra shilling was a superfluity, you see."

"I wonder that with your theories you——"

"I have no theories, Mary."

"Well, with your opinions, then—that you never threw yourself heart and soul into some of the social problems of the day."

"Oh, be hanged to the social problems! They are invented and supported by the very people who are always deploring them, and pretending to cure them."

"But you might be a reformer."

"What! one of those fellows with the shiny black bag stuffed full of pamphlets? Here you are! Pure water, cheap beer, non-vaccination, free education, the extension of the franchise, or the confiscation of property, here it is, all in the black bag. Only name your particular fad, and he'll steam ahead on any lines you please. God! I'd sooner sweep a crossing."

His half jest, whole earnest amused Mary.

“Oh, I meant an honest reformer,” she said.

“The only honest reformer I know is the man who is willing to be ‘transformed by the renewing’ of his own mind. He’ll find it a much tougher job than reforming his neighbours.”

“Have you found it tough?”

Wrayburn looked at her, and laughed. “If any one else asked me that question, I should tell them to mind their own business,” he said. “Yes, I have found it tough, Mary.”

“That is because you are bent on following out the Sermon on the Mount and St. Paul’s Epistles to their logical conclusion. Most of us are content to stop halfway.”

“Well, if a man says, ‘I mean to get on, and make as much as ever I can, and give my whole time to it, if I go to the devil in the end,’ I can at least understand and

even respect him. But if he tells me he's 'seeking a better country, even a heavenly,' and is not conformed to the world, but is simply 'not slothful in business,' when he's all the week up to his eyes in stocks and shares, syndicates for promoting this, and companies for developing the other, I can't help thinking he's a nice old-fashioned sort of 'stranger and pilgrim.' And it would take a lot of Exeter Hall to persuade me this was the faith once delivered to the saints."

"Tell me, then, Lawrence, have you decided that, for yourself, everything beyond a hundred a year is superfluity? Indeed, you can't have had the full benefit even of that, for when I was in Swanneck they told me you had advanced money to one or two of the men to buy teams and farming implements."

"And they repaid me to the last cent," he said quickly. "I never was a penny out of pocket by one of them."

"I am glad to hear they were of such exceeding honesty."

"Mary dear, for pity's sake, don't get it into your head that I'm all for docking and curtailing and overhauling things, as if I were appointed to carry out some new sumptuary laws of my own making. For your sake I wish with all my heart that I was a rich man. If you were not a very exceptional sort of woman, I should not have the courage to ask you to marry me."

"How came you to own a cottage in Westmoreland?"

"It was my share of some property my respected grandmother saw fit to divide into infinitesimal portions among her grandchildren. They say we came from the north originally. Certainly the name sounds as if it had a northern derivation. But we are so long settled and intermarried in Cornwall that we may safely say we belong to it."

"I should say Celtic blood predominates

in you," said Mary, glancing at his dark, clear-cut, strongly marked profile, with its peculiar expression of mingled energy and contemplation.

He was watching some pigeons on the red-tiled roof of an outhouse in a neighbouring garden. They were strutting delicately, or taking short wheeling flights into the surrounding trees.

"They remind me of my boyhood," said he; "I used to be a great pigeon-fancier. I should like to see the old home again, though it's all swept away now. When we're married, I'll take you down there, Mary. I should not care to go alone; but with my wife it's different. Such a very evident palingenesis would prove the power of the past was ended. Would you have any objection?"

"Not the least," she answered readily; "I should like very much to see it."

"When shall it be, then? There's no

use in delaying. But if you are afraid to venture out on such a frail raft, I'll wait as long as you like. I've told you plainly I have got responsibilities that I can't rid myself of for another year or two. Would you prefer to wait, Mary?"

"No, indeed; waiting is very poor work," Mary answered cheerfully. "We shall not hurt, I dare say. And if we become altogether bankrupt, we can always fall back upon poor old Swanneck."

"You delightful little creature!" he exclaimed, and, putting his arm around her, kissed her with fervour. "Only this morning I told Mr. Vanburgh I meant to have one golden year—a year sacred to happiness. If nothing particular turns up at the end of that—why, then we'll have another sacred year."

Mary looked at him affectionately, with laughing eyes. "My good Lawrence!" she said gently.

“Say rather, your lucky Lawrence,” he replied.

“‘Come, pensive nun, devout and pure,
Sober, steadfast, and demure,
All in a robe of darkest grain,
•Flowing with majestic train.’

See how accurately the lines fit you! It was that *Penseroso* style and touch-me-not manner of yours that first captivated my vagrant heart. I admired you immensely, Mary; thought of you, dreamed of you, longed for you. And now, at last—

“‘For whom bindest thou
In wreaths thy golden hair, plain in thy neatness?’

but for your most humble and unworthy servant?’”

“You are in a remarkably Miltonic vein this morning,” said Mary, lightly.

“Oh, Milton can say a thing or two rather better than a man can say them for himself. Those lines I just quoted are always associated with you. Milton leaves just the same

impression of complete satisfaction and repose that fine music gives ; and you do the same."

" Really, I'm almost afraid to appropriate such a very high-toned compliment."

" Why, you little duffer, you know very well I must have been attracted by something in you, or how could you have become so dear to me ? "

They sat in happy silence for several minutes ; then Mary said—

" After all, how little I have really known of your inner life and its working ! "

He did not tell her that the same thought with regard to herself had occurred to him when he learned her history from Mrs. Gray. He was very well content to let that bright garden be the quiet grave of the dead past.

" There is grandfather beckoning to us from the window. We had better go in," said Mary.

They rose and sauntered slowly up the

path, Wrayburn, from behind, putting aside the lower branches that touched her hair, and singing in a low-pitched voice—

“‘Lo’e me, lo’e me on the banks o’ Tweed,
An’ think nae mair on the braes o’ Yarrow.’”





CHAPTER II.

A WONDERFUL change had come over the Vanburgh household. The “spirit of heaviness” had been replaced by the “garment of praise.” There were smiles now where care had sat so lately dull and blank. Sighs were chased away by cheery jest and laughter. The few poor pensioners to whom the humble charity of the family was extended were treated with a larger liberality, a warmer interest, a kindlier sympathy. The wheels of life ran smoothly along the “common round, the daily task.” A calm joy, a sweet content shone like a sunbeam into each heart. Wrayburn’s

bright presence had wrought this change in the home which had been so long dimmed by affliction.

There are some people who are always giving themselves away without effort or the appearance of an ostentatious unselfishness. Wrayburn was one of those. At all times (whatever he might say to the contrary) the door of his heart stood wide open to weakness, sorrow, or misfortune. He looked leniently on humanity's failures and shortcomings; and, for himself, made small demand upon his fellows. It came quite natural to him to add to the happiness of those with whom his lot might be cast, without any thought of whether they would do as much for him.

At this time he devoted himself principally to Mr. Vanburgh, talking and reading to him, walking and gardening with him. The old man was quite alive to the value of such companionship. The future looked

bright and hopeful to him ; already he felt that "golden year" was beginning to dawn.

If any one else had suggested that Mr. Vanburgh should go to a weak play at the poor dull little theatre, that was shut half its time, he would have resented the suggestion as an impertinence. But he allowed himself to be carried thither by Wrayburn, and enjoyed it hugely ; and afterwards sat ever so late over the supper-table, telling Mary all about it, discoursing upon the actors of his young days—a favourite topic with oldsters—and drawing comparisons odious to the present state of the drama.

It is not to be supposed that because Wrayburn bestowed so much attention on the old man, he altogether neglected his *fiancée*. He was not, perhaps, a lover who would have come up to Mrs. Gray's standard of excellence, but he satisfied Mary. The affectionate *camaraderie* with which men of few but strong affections treat their wives.

or their sweethearts is a very close and sincere bond, and will bear a good tough strain.

The wedding was to be the simple affair a wedding naturally is when dissociated from the marriage-feast. No cake, no bridesmaids, no wedding favours, or wedding guests were needed. There was no good reason why the marriage should not take place at once. But Mary had fixed the first of October as *the* day, and Wrayburn knew she was trying to put as many months as possible between this wedding-day and that wretched death-bed. And indeed he had no reason to complain, for these pre-nuptial days were very happy, gliding by with the placid brightness of a stream flowing through sunshine down to that boundless sea which typifies eternity, to which all our days, good and evil, are swiftly gliding.

Of evenings the blinds were drawn over the front window; but the garden window

was left open for the breeze to enter, and the moon, if there was one, to shine in. When the lamps were lit, their glow gave a softer aspect to the old massive furniture, that looked all too grimly dark and ponderous by day. The small tea-table, with its bright array of pretty china and silver and flowers, would be drawn aside. The piano would be opened, and Mary would play her grandfather's favourite bits from the great masters; soft mazy *Lieder*, or more strenuous sonata.

Wrayburn sang for them also; sometimes scraps from operas or oratorios, more frequently those "old songs that oft recall past memories," such as "Tom Bowling," "Good-bye, Sweetheart," "In Sheltered Vale," or "The Anchor's Weighed." Partly to please the old man, and partly to please himself, because he felt the power, he threw a more emotional tone into his singing than ever before.

Then would Mr. Vanburgh lean back in

his chair with folded hands and closed eyes, while the room was filled with the cunning modulations of the full round voice as it rose with harmonious volume through every chord of most melodious passion, or sank pathetically through many a smooth and lingering cadence ere it died away dreamy and faint. When he sang "Tom Bowling," there were often tears under the closed eyelids. But whenever he sang "Oft in the Stilly Night," poor Mr. Vanburgh would be obliged to hurry out into the garden, "to see what the night was like."

"It's a shame for you to sing like that when you see how it affects him," Mary said in smiling rebuke, during one of those hasty exits.

"How can I help it, if he's so easily affected?" laughed Wrayburn.

"Oh, but you know you do it on purpose," she replied. "You never used to sing like that in Swanneck."

He rose from the piano, and, going over to her, took her face gently between his hands.

"It's a trick I learned in San Francisco, Mary," he said, looking down into her eyes. "I used to take that old boat I had out as far as possible beyond human eyes and ears, and then I'd sing and halloo to the very heavens. It seemed to ease something in me that felt as if it had gone wrong. It sounds very nice to 'sing in a boat on the bay;' but when you've felt bad yourself you take a malicious pleasure in making other people feel bad too. It doesn't distress me in the least to see Mr. Vanburgh take up his handkerchief and run out."

"I'm afraid you are only half civilized."

"And likely to remain 'half' to the end of the chapter. Would you like me to acquire the 'p-yar haut and hamble voy-ice' of Mr. Eastwick?"

Now, Wrayburn had gone with them on Sundays, and knelt and said his prayers in

the gimcrack pseudo-Gothic church that was a good deal "sicklied o'er by the pale cast of (Ritualistic) thought."

There was much flower and candle, obtrusive brass cross, and somewhat shabby drapery. And there the Bread of Life was broken—or rather, such dry mouldy crusts as he wot of were crumbled—to the faithful by the Reverend Eastwick. The metallic intonation, the mechanical *Amens*, the keynote sounded from the organ before asking the Lord to open their lips that the mouths of the hired singers might show forth His praise, all grated upon Wrayburn. He was not a High churchman, Low churchman, or Dissenter. He had been called a Free-thinker. For seven years he had not set foot inside a church, and cared little what outward form a man's religion took.

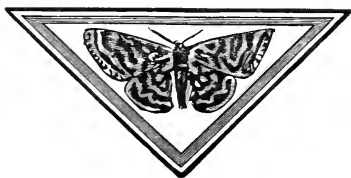
In his days of vanity, when all went well with him, he had allowed himself to be befogged by a host of *-ists* and *-isms*.

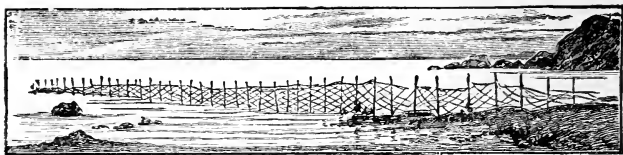
Later on, when things went not so well, he began to demand of his soul what it could offer him in exchange for "life's fleeting good, youth's fleeter joy." Painfully did he realize what it is for a man to have lost his faith, or never to have found it. Then, not in any sudden panic, but with clear and flexible mind, he began to wrestle resolutely with those strong proud angels of doubt and negation. Ultimately he had prevailed. Gradually the man's stormy heart had lashed itself to repose. Somewhat of that peace which the world neither gives nor takes away found sanctuary within him. Alone among the wild hills and solitudes, he had prayed those prayers which "batter at heaven's gates," had meditated, had been tempted, and at length had worshipped.

"Oh, never yet hath mortal drunk
A draught restorative,
That welled not from the depths of his own soul!"

It was no wonder that the sing-song

prayers, the elaborate but tawdry ceremonial, and the "harmonious fustian" of the sermons in the Longbridge church filled him with ironical sadness. Of a verity, there was no cure of souls to be found therein. He said to himself that if any of this flock found the gate into the narrow way, it would be less by the help than against the hindrance of this drawling steward of the mysteries.





CHAPTER III.

SOME forty-eight hours before the wedding, Wrayburn announced his intention of going to London.

“But I thought it was settled that we are to go there,” Mary remarked innocently.

“So it is, but we won’t want to be worried with business then,” he replied. “This is only a business visit. Mr. Probyn, whom I want to see, is a lawyer. He managed my father’s affairs; and since I went to America he has managed mine, making payments, forwarding money, and so on.”

In the evening of the same day he arrived in London, and went direct to Mr. Probyn’s

office. That gentleman had gone home, however ; so he got into a hansom and drove to Tavistock Square.

Mr. Probyn was a bachelor, and was just sitting down in solitary state to his dinner when Wrayburn was announced.

“Bring him in here, Evans, bring him in here,” he said, rising from the table as his visitor entered.

“Lawrence Wrayburn, is it really you ?” he exclaimed, shaking hands warmly. “Why, bless my soul, I thought you were in ‘Frisco.”

“So I was until quite lately,” returned the other. “I’ve only been three or four weeks in England.”

“Evans, take Mr. Wrayburn’s overcoat, and place a chair for him,” Mr. Probyn said to the servant. “You’ll take pot-luck, Lawrence ; I had only begun dinner,” he added to Wrayburn. “Sit down, and they’ll bring a hot plate. What’s in the wind now ?

Tired of the backwoods, and coming back at last to civilized life?"

"No," said Wrayburn, seating himself at the dinner-table; "I'm not tired of the backwoods yet, nor am I come to settle permanently in England. I have come to get married."

Mr. Probyn paused in the act of conveying a bit of turbot to the plate before him, and looked over his gold spectacles at Wrayburn.

"Oh, you're going to be married, eh?" he said slowly, putting the bit of fish down very gingerly, with a pre-occupied air. "Well, I'm not sorry to hear it. Most men seem to find marriage a sort of millstone round their necks, and a weight of some kind is just what you need."

"Now, isn't that a nice way to congratulate a fellow?" Wrayburn said laughingly.

"Certainly I congratulate you. I sincerely hope you may be as happy as your heart can wish. But I shall be disappointed if it

does not cure you of your flightiness. Ah, Lawrence, I could have made your fortune for you at the Bar, and you were cut out for it. You always had quick wits and a long tongue—an eloquent tongue, we'll say. I never felt more disappointed over anything than over your miserable failure. It's a scandal for a young man with all your advantages to waste himself as you have done."

"Never mind that now," said Wrayburn, good naturedly. "You'll be still more disgusted with me before I've done."

"If you mean disgusted with you for marrying, that I am not. Though I never found time myself to marry, I find no fault with the institution, and I think it may do you good. Wives don't like Quixotic husbands; they take too much from their own millinery bills, and dock the number of evening parties. Who is the lady, Lawrence?—not American, surely?"

"Oh no."

“Good family, I suppose?”

“Quite as good as my own.”

“Any money?”

“Not a cent.”

“Oh, dear, dear, that’s very bad! What on earth are you going to live on?”

“Not on my wife, anyhow.”

“Well, no; but a little money is always handy. She’s young and good looking, of course?”

“Five and twenty, and very moderately good looking. She has been married before.”

Mr. Probyn gave another searching glance over his spectacles. “It’s not possible you are marrying some penniless little widow out of pity?” said he.

Wrayburn felt rather hurt. “I should not insult any woman by marrying her from pity,” he said; “and I have no greater fancy for penniless widows than you have. You’ll see her, I hope, very shortly, and then you

can judge for yourself ; but I don't want to hear your judgment."

"You are not a bit altered, Lawrence," the old lawyer said, chuckling ; "always ready to lash out with your heels if any one stroked you the wrong way. Have you seen anything of your brother ?"

"Not yet, but we intend going down there."

"Ah ! you'll be astonished, that's all I can say. Clever woman that ; fine manager. She has made a man of Ted."

"Did he so particularly need to be made a man of ?" Wrayburn said dryly.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I spent a week with him last June, and really a finer place than he has now I should not wish to see."

"Where has he got all the money from for his improvements ? His wife had nothing, and I've heard of no legacies."

"My dear fellow," Mr. Probyn said

briskly, "he has been working and keeping abreast of his times, while you have been going to sleep at the back of the north wind."

"Working at what?"

"At various things. He is no flat, I can tell you. He has speculated considerably, and been very successful. Then he has made judicious investments, and got a good return for his capital. Your talent has been buried out of sight, while his has grown into ten talents."

"Perhaps so," said Wrayburn, thoughtfully, and, leaning back in his chair, sat silent for some time, his eyes abstractedly fixed upon a picture on the opposite wall.

"Do you know what has brought me here this evening?" he said suddenly.

"No; you have not told me yet."

"I came to ask if you could raise some money for me on that annuity of mine."

Mr. Probyn pursed up his lips, and began to shake his head slowly and solemnly.

"That doesn't sound well, Lawrence," he said. "A man who is about to marry should not be under the necessity of trying to raise loans."

"I know that," said Wrayburn, frankly. "Of course they hamper one for long enough, and are a beastly nuisance altogether. But I must have money from some source, and I can think of no other."

"But the amount you would be able to raise on such security would not be worth the trouble and expense of raising it. You would feel no good of the paltry sum you would get, and be worried from the first with a debt."

"All this I steadfastly believe. But the fact remains, I can't get married without a cent in my pocket, and I'm to be married the day after to-morrow."

"And, my dear boy, all I can tell you is,

that you have no business to think of marrying with such prospects," Mr. Probyn returned sharply. "You must discontinue those absurd pensions."

"Even if I did that eventually, there would be nothing available for immediate use."

"Oh, of course I could advance it to you at once."

"I don't see my way to stopping those pensions, as you call them, just yet. Don't you see how I'm fixed? I only want some cash in hand to spend right off. After that we'll manage on what I've been drawing all along."

"Your brother would willingly settle five hundred a year on you. Why don't you accept his offer?"

"I would just as soon think of taking money in a breach-of-promise case."

"Nonsense! Ted has no idea of compensation in his mind. He naturally feels

there is a great inequality in your relative positions, and, as the elder and wealthier brother, he would like you to have your share of the good things going."

"It may be so, but he is welcome to the whole of it."

"Well, I consider it very ridiculous pride on your part, especially as you are his heir-presumptive."

"'Prithee, Hal, trouble me no more with vanity.' Certain castles in Spain are the only property I am heir to."

Mr. Probyn made no reply, but slowly poured himself out a glass of Madeira and passed the wine to Wrayburn.

"How do you propose to live on a hundred a year?" he asked.

The wrongdoer shrugged his shoulders.

"You couldn't get a house fit to live in under fifty," Mr. Probyn continued, as if seriously thinking the matter out; "and consider the taxes, coal, and gas, before you

have put a single meal on the table, paid your servants, or clothed your wife and yourself."

"It looks as if I should have to become a candidate for some post as labour-master in a Union, janitor, or superintendent of Artisans' dwellings, or something where rooms, coal, and gas are thrown in gratis," said Wrayburn, laughing.

"Well," said the other, with a grim smile, "they say 'care killed the cat,' a creature supposed to have nine lives. But, as you take things so easily, you evidently intend to die in some more honourable company than the cat's. I should advise you to return to the colonies."

"I wish to heaven I could return; nothing would please me better. But, unfortunately, ladies have a prejudice against colonial life. And you can't ask a woman to immolate herself on the altar of matrimony first thing."

"Better immolate herself in that way than

wake up some fine morning in England to find the bailiffs in the house," Mr. Probyn said remorselessly.

"It won't be so bad as that, I hope."

"My dear Lawrence, your Robinson Crusoe life is perfect in its own way, no doubt, but you have forgotten what life is like in the Old World. You can't take your gun and go out and shoot a duck for your breakfast here, and cook it on a fire made from the trees in your own garden. There are the gun-licence, the landlord, and the game laws to be considered. And everything runs on the same lines. This is not a good country for poor men. The standard of living is high, and there is something to be considered at every step."

"Don't I know that? It is not my wish or intention to stay a day longer than I can help; of that you may be very sure. But while here we shall not live in London. It would be useless and impossible to try, and

the game wouldn't be worth the candle. Everything is changed—in myself most of all. This soot and grime, the endless mob of people wherever you go, and the compression are all hateful to me. Every bit of individuality is gradually trampled out of one. While we are in England we shall dawdle about and make things as tolerable as we can."

"But nothing is so expensive as such dawdling."

"Yes, if you travel first-class everywhere, and put up at all the flash hotels."

"And what a delightful prospect it is, to be sure, to think of going third class, and having to look up all the mangy lodgings in the back streets of every town you come to!" Mr. Probyn exclaimed, in fine scorn.

Wrayburn was not in the least ruffled by the exasperating remark. He looked across the dinner-table with calm eyes, and broke bits of bread into minute crumbs upon his plate with negligent industry.

“While I was in California,” said he, “I wrote some articles on life in British Columbia, and sent them with my own sketches to an illustrated paper. They answered very well; that is, they were accepted and paid for, and more stuff of the same kind asked for. I left before the second lot was finished, but I’ve managed to finish it since my arrival here. There’s nothing to hinder me from going on with such work if the positive necessity is laid upon one to produce more money.”

“Oh, nothing in the world to hinder you! I’ve no doubt you can turn out very good work when you choose, and while the divine afflatus is upon you. Still, that sort of thing is only a makeshift, and wretchedly uncertain. You’ll work out that particular vein in a marvellously short time. People like everything hot and hot nowadays. Before your supply runs short you’ll find you have outlived your market,” Mr. Probyn grumbled.

“See here,” said Wrayburn, light of heart and unabashed, “you seem to have bought up some fellow’s bankrupt stock of wet blanket; but don’t pay it out so liberally. Keep a few yards for another time wherewith to extinguish the fire of enthusiasm you appear to see blazing under this tranquil exterior. Don’t you see I’m not bound to peg away always at the same thing? The descriptive vein is not my speciality. When Columbia gives out, I can betake myself to ‘fresh fields and pastures new.’”

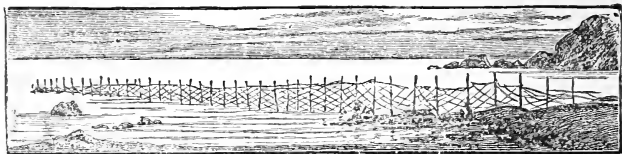
Mr. Probyn looked at him very much as he might have looked at an innocent child whose youthful confidence and guileless faith he pitied, but would not check. He nodded his head several times, and compressed his lips until they were as thin as a wafer.

“Always the same,” he said regretfully; “never any medium between shameless idleness and sudden fits of violent industry.”

“What you call industry is only another form of idleness, perhaps. Yet I fancy I could put my shoulder to the wheel for the sake of some one I loved.”

The lawyer made no answer. He looked long and earnestly at Wrayburn, whose meditative eyes had strayed again to the picture. This hard-headed, hard-working, practical man of the world regarded the younger man as a mere sentimentalist, a visionary, little better than a cumberer of the ground. But he had known him from childhood, and felt a certain affection, or even an indulgent admiration, for him.

“Well, well, we must see what can be done about this loan, I suppose,” he said, rising from the table. “It would not do to let it be said your father’s son was so stripped of this world’s goods that he could not take to himself a wife for lack of money.”



CHAPTER IV.

IF the marriage morning did not dawn a day of cloudless skies, it nevertheless dawned a very perfect day. There was no brilliant sunshine; the blue sky was veiled by an aërial film of motionless grey cloud that cast a silvery obscurity over the bright earth. Every distance ended in a soft vapoury greyness, and the same mist mingled itself subtly with the tawny autumn foliage. Even things unlovely in themselves when distinctly seen in all their naked effrontery, became almost lovely in this luminous haze, all glaring colour and unsightly outlines softened and toned down by

its tender, dreamy, illusive grace. Profound stillness was in the air, that matchless tranquillity of the fading year. In holly bush and rowan tree starlings and robins whistled and sang, and the pungent autumn flowers shed abroad their aromatic fragrance.

Mr. Vanburgh and Mary sat down alone to breakfast, for Wrayburn had not returned to the house, and the meal was rather a silent one.

"It only wants a quarter to nine, Mary," said Mr. Vanburgh, who was inclined to be nervous and rather fidgety. "I suppose Lawrence will be at the church. He could not possibly make any mistake as to the day or the hour?"

"There will be no mistake; he will be there," Mary said reassuringly.

"But I'd get ready now, my love, I really would. I don't think we have any time to lose."

In her usual leisurely way she went

upstairs to her own room, thinking all the time of her brilliant bridal long ago. There had been no lack of flowers and favours, merry pealing of bells and wedding music, guests and garlands and feasting, old slippers, and good wishes, and God-speeds. All the preparations and accompaniments for a prosperous love-match had been there. And how had it all ended !

A pang shot through her heart as she surveyed herself critically. No one would believe there were those seven years between herself and Wrayburn. Time had dealt more kindly with his face than with hers. For his sake she wished the bloom of her youth had not so completely vanished. It was a natural pain, a natural wish, and they were but momentary. She was downstairs again before Mr. Vanburgh had done brushing his hat and hunting for his gloves.

They went out quietly, as for their daily walk, and she took his arm as usual. But

though he walked erect and stately, like herself, the poor old man's heart died within him at the thought that they were so walking for the last time. She might slip her arm through his, and take step for step with him, but never more would it be quite the same—never again would she be only *his* Mary, his darling child, his little girl. He had ardently desired happiness for her, but now that happiness was attained, now that he was facing loneliness, and assisting at the burning of his own boats, he found, what we all experience sooner or later, that all happiness is attended by sacrifice somewhere.

As they entered the church he valiantly put aside his weakness. It was a relief to him to see that the bridegroom had made no mistake, but was there waiting at the chancel steps. The curate was present as well as the vicar, the curate's two unmarried sisters were there, the organist, and the organist's wife. It seems, indeed, quite im-

possible to be married so quietly or at such an early hour that some woman, "rising while it is yet night," will not come herself and bring other women with her, to watch with ever fresh delight and interest the solemnization of matrimony.

The organist's wife and the two spinsters fluttered "like doves to their windows," and to them came presently other doves who had been to the early service. Including Betty and the sexton, there were quite twenty or more spectators.

In the solemn moments of life the power to realize their solemnity is not present; that comes afterwards. When the deeper emotions are stirred, and feeling is intense, the thoughts release themselves from anything like cohesion. When thought is concentrated the aberration shows itself in action, and we see a man looking diligently, if vaguely, for the book before him or the pen he holds in his hand. It would not,

therefore, be fair to accuse Mary and Wrayburn of levity because the prayers and exhortations were little more than a sound to them.

To Mary there was a painful sense of unreality in it all. She heard her own voice plighting her troth to the man beside her, but seemed to hear, in between, a ghoul-like voice and laughter mocking her.

Wrayburn was giving a ring to some one, or some one was giving a ring to him, and he was made to repeat over it something that sounded like an incantation. As the words, "with all my worldly goods I thee endow" passed his lips, he congratulated himself that he had been able to get through Mr. Probyn certain drafts and bank-notes now safe in his breast-pocket.

When the wedding party returned from church they had a very bad quarter of an hour. Nothing remained to be done. Everything had been so methodically

arranged that they were ready to wish there had been a little less punctuality and forethought, that something had been overlooked, to cause a bit of bustle now. There was nothing for them to do, and nothing to say, or if there was, they were afraid to say it. For poor Mr. Vanburgh was in a very weak frame of mind, needing only a chance word to be quite overcome by his feelings, and the fear of saying that unlucky word was a very effectual bar to speech. They tried to regale themselves with the cake and wine provided for their refreshment, but no one dared to induce festivity by proposing a toast or making an attempt at a speech. They were very silent, and felt very wretched, to tell the truth. By way of dispersing this embarrassment, Wrayburn took out some letters, and, selecting two, handed them to Mary. One was from his brother Ted, the other from Mr. Probyn. She read the latter first.

"DEAR LAWRENCE,

"As that other little matter is now satisfactorily settled, I may return to the subject that sent you off at a tangent.

"You appear to think there is something derogatory in one gentleman offering money to another. I assure you in this practical age cheques are much appreciated as wedding presents. The practice may smack of vulgarity, but for busy men like myself it is very convenient.

"I might, of course, show my friendly intentions by giving you the customary silver tea-service or dressing-case. But for a bird of passage like yourself, I fancy the less impedimenta there is of that kind the better. Besides, in the backwoods I believe it is not considered unfashionable to serve tea in a tin can or even in a saucepan-lid. So I still think there is nothing more useful than money. You can't have too much of that commodity; it packs into much less space than the tea-service, and you can't say now, as you did before, that I only offered it to relieve you from the necessity of raising the wind in another way.

"So please accept the enclosed, with my heartiest good wishes for your future happiness. If you won't take this you shall have nothing else from me; and from all poor proud fellows like yourself, 'Good Lord, deliver us.'

"Believe me, dear Lawrence,

"Very sincerely yours,

"HENRY PROBYN.

“P.S.—I can’t get over your damned folly in not letting me transfer those Victory Hill shares. Everything points to a speedy boom.—H. P.”

Mary returned the letter with a smile. “Your friend is very outspoken,” she said.

“Oh yes. He and I don’t hit it off very well, and he never scruples to speak his mind very plainly. Yet I must be rather a favourite, for, though he has the name of being close-fisted, he has treated me very generously. The wedding present he speaks of was a cheque for two hundred pounds.”

“Why, Lawrence,” Mr. Vanburgh exclaimed, “that was quite a little windfall for you!”

“Wasn’t it? And that was only a compromise. He offered me something very much better.”

“And what was that?”

“He wanted, right or wrong, to transfer some shares in the Wheel of Fortune to my name.”

“Why did you not let him?” asked Mary.

“Because a man who finds fault with oak forests should not plant acorns. Read Ted’s letter.”

This was dated from Crieff, and ran as follows:—

“MY DEAR BROTHER,

“Your letter just received. If I wait to reply in detail I shall lose this post, and very probably miss you. Let me just say how surprised and delighted I am to find you are in England once more, and how glad to hear of the important change you are about to make in your life. With my whole heart I wish you every happiness.

“By all means come to Sanclerc. Nothing could possibly give me greater pleasure than to see you again, and to welcome your wife among us.

“If you have not time to write again before leaving London, wire back when you may be expected, as we are returning south in a few days.

“Ever yours affectionately,

“EDWARD WRAYBURN.”

“He writes very kindly,” Mary said,

giving back this second letter. "When did you tell him we should come?"

"I did not say. I left that for you to decide."

"Then I should say this day week. We shall not stay longer than a week in London."

In England the custom of a wedding trip is persevered in, however poor the newly wedded pair may be. Possibly there are pleasanter ways of spending a honeymoon than in jolting from city hotels to country inns. But as yet we have discovered nothing better.

In obedience to this unwritten law, Wrayburn had been compelled to take Iago's advice, and put money in his purse. Thus a debt, small indeed, but still unnecessary, had been incurred that he might have ready money to throw away on a few weeks of expensive pleasure. For people of a generous, loose-handed, improvident turn like

himself, the mistake of such a social arrangement is obvious.

In reading Mr. Probyn's letter, Mary had seen at a glance, what it never occurred to Wrayburn she would see at all, that the object of the London visit had been to raise money. Fully acquainted with the low state of his finances, and his recklessness as a financier, she was prepared to act as a break, being more prudent and worldly wise than he. Prosaic commonplace he hated, and had no intention of going any way but the way of his own sweet will. That will now inclined him to throw a rosy glow over his marriage; an amaranthine bloom to tinge withal the coming years of married bliss. As a rule no break will act very powerfully on a man who is determined to feed "on honey-dew" and drink "the milk of Paradise." Knowing this, Mary contented herself with an attempt to shorten their sojourn in London.

If one had spent a term of imprisonment in a certain prison, one would scarcely revisit that spot with great joy or elation.

London had been Mary's prison-house. There she had chiefly resided during her unhappy life with Loxdale, and there she had ground out a bitter servitude. There was no West End park in which she had not walked, eating out her heart with restless misery. Every main thoroughfare had some evil memory associated with it, and the quiet side-streets or squares were no better. In this smart house they had lived in brief splendour; in this shabby street, or this still shabbier, they had lodged, leading the life of dwellers in tents, homeless, in every respect to which the word "home" with all its associations can be applied, as vagrants. Here he had bullied and threatened her; there he had cajoled and deceived her. The very stones seemed to cry out and remind her of that heart-sick time. The

great, rich, laughing, tumultuous, gilded city presented to her morbid imagination the idea of a torture-chamber. Under all the fine show of insolvent opulence she could think only of tragedies being enacted in not far distant corners ; of vice exacting from virtue its sole remaining rights ; of brutality trampling on helplessness ; of solitude and bitter penury ; of wrongs mutely borne ; of the ceaseless groan and protestation against injustice daily ascending from anguished hearts.

Perhaps it was because he guessed something of this that Wrayburn chose to bring her there after their marriage. Perhaps he wanted to play the magician and transform the prison-house. Perhaps he wanted to make the desert bloom ; to drop bright, blessed, happy memories into those vitiated streets ; to erect a kindly barrier between her and that cruel past.

Wrayburn had never lived much in

London. The friends whom he once had there were scattered and unknown to him now. When Mary suggested that he should seek them out, he declined. "I should only be like a white crow among them now," he said. The very idea that he should bring any portion of "that mob" in upon his honeymoon seclusion was to him like "sweet bells jangled out of tune." But they went to the dinner-party given in their honour by Mr. Probyn, a stiff and stately affair, at which all the guests were more or less strangers to both bride and bridegroom.

Then they had the two Lansdell boys to spend a day with them. Mrs. Lansdell could not be spared for the whole day from her linen-keeping duties, but came to luncheon. Doubtless the boys enjoyed the feast, but their mother was not a person addicted to enjoyment. She was a round, rosy little woman, as plump and tight as a gooseberry,

but anxious-eyed, and serious in manner, with a good deal of that dry civility observable in people who are considerably "brow-beaten" in their daily bread-winning avocations, yet, privately, are of an independent turn of mind. She persisted in regarding everything from a strictly business point of view, producing her bank-book, and entering into all the details of her affairs with Wrayburn. "That you may see exactly how I stand," said she; "for if Robert holds to this notion of being a doctor, I have the money to put him through, and pay all his fees. So he'll be no more trouble or expense to you, sir; and that's *one* load off my mind."

She spoke as if her mind contained as many more loads as one of Pickford's vans might about hold, and Wrayburn suppressed an involuntary smile.

"You deserve great praise for your economy," he said; "but, I may frankly tell

you, I'm very well pleased to hear that Robert will soon be launched, and need my help no longer, for money is more useful to me now than it was."

"And there's Jack, too——" Mrs. Lansdell began, but he interrupted her.

"Never mind about Jack just now," he said. "Jack must stay at school a little longer. Don't try to burden yourself all at once, Mrs. Lansdell, in your feverish desire for independence. Another year will soon pass over, and then we'll see what Jack is fit for."

Mrs. Lansdell was by no means demonstrative, but when Wrayburn had gone out with the two lads, she said to Mary—

"Mr. Wrayburn has done more for those two boys, ma'am, than many a man does for his own sons. It'll be a lasting grief and disgrace to me if they don't turn out creditable."

"Oh, I am sure they'll do credit to you,"

Mary said kindly. "They are very nice boys."

"Yes, ma'am ; and, of course, I can't help wishing them to have every advantage ; but, at the same time, as a married woman myself, I know it isn't right or reasonable to expect another woman won't consider the expense, especially when she's a lady, and her husband not too well off, as Mr. Probyn has taken good care to remind me times and again. I've always known Mr. Wrayburn would marry sooner or later, and I've, as I may say, prepared myself for it. But I never expected him to go on spending money on outsiders once he *was* married, and I don't know what to say about Jack staying at school."

Mrs. Lansdell sighed heavily, and stood up to put on her veil before a mirror.

"Mr. Wrayburn never does anything in a grudging spirit," Mary replied. "You would like to see your sons properly

educated, and able to take their place among gentlemen."

"That's just it," Mrs. Lansdell said quickly. "They've had an expensive education, and there haven't been wanting them that's told me so, and said they might just as well be brought up to be plumbers and painters. And so they might if they were only *my* children, for my father was nothing but a journeyman plumber and painter himself. But Mr. Wrayburn was their father's friend. Eleven years ago, when the poor dear lay dying, he promised he'd see to it his children should be brought up as he'd wish to have brought them up himself. It wasn't for *my* sake it was done—oh dear, no! And for their father's sake I don't want to stand in their light, nor yet do I want to trespass on Mr. Wrayburn's kindness."

With her mind divided between these incompatibilities, Mrs. Lansdell gathered up

all her paraphernalia and took her departure with that serious air of hers, leaving Mary feeling rather amused.

Wrayburn would not hear of staying only a week in town. "We will have another week here," he said; "then we'll take a week in Paris, and after that we'll go to Cornwall."

"I'm afraid we are making a very bad beginning," said Mary, "for people who intend to live on a hundred a year."

"And I think we are making a very good one," he replied boldly. "A man doesn't get married every day, and he does well to be jubilant, and even extravagant, over it, according to his means. That's where a *pauvre diable* like myself has the advantage. If I wore purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day, I should be hard set to find some way of letting myself out on a genuine red-letter day. Even 'Arry, when he gets married, spends his whole week's

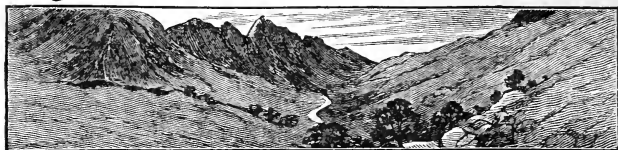
wages in whisky and gin for the adequate intoxication of himself and his friends. And, though thirty shillings may cover the whole amount, he has been as prodigal in his way as those who have spent hundreds. Let me have my little extravagance this once, Mary."

"I marvel more than ever," she said, "how you have lived so contentedly in Swanneck, for really I think you are very fond of pleasure."

"So I am," he returned; "but there's pleasure and pleasure. The charm of our present mode of life would soon cease if I were forced to continue it. To take one's fling for a few weeks, and have a burst of gaiety, gives a sort of satisfaction to the mind, like bathing in a rough sea or drinking good champagne. But one can't go on for ever bathing and for ever drinking champagne — '*perdrix, toujours perdrix*' — one likes to stop before it gets to that."

In the end he had his own way. His programme was faithfully carried out, and it was not until three weeks later that they turned their faces towards North Cornwall.





CHAPTER V.

THE travellers alighted at a small roadside station, and found Colonel Wrayburn awaiting them. The two men greeted each other with an ostentatious cordiality assumed for the purpose of concealing the real estrangement which had sprung up between them. A carriage was standing outside in the road, the beautiful bays champing their bits and tossing their heads. To this Colonel Wrayburn led his relatives, and they were soon being swiftly whirled along the country roads through the gathering twilight.

After a mile or two had been passed the

carriage entered a broad drive, through a pair of bronze gates worthy of Andrea di Pisa himself. On either hand undulating sward stretched gently away until it was hidden by a screen of trees. Here and there a row of giant elms stood in single file, or horse-chestnuts reared their symmetrical forms in solitary grandeur.

"I don't remember any lodge gates so far down as this," Wrayburn observed suddenly.

"No, but you remember Penhallow's meadows," Colonel Wrayburn replied. "He died, and I bought in the property and made a park out of the old fields."

"But there were a lot of cottages."

"Only a score or so of miserable old hovels, little better than ruins. I could not retain such an eyesore as those cottages; so I effaced them and cut this drive."

"And where are the old gates with the lions' heads and the ivy? Have you effaced those too?"

“No; they form the entrance to the private grounds now. This part of the park is open to pedestrians, for there’s an old right of way that I can’t interfere with. The road curves round there to the left, you see, while we go on here to the right.” Then Colonel Wrayburn left his brother to reflect, if he chose, upon the mutability of all things, and turned his attention to Mary.

As the carriage-wheels grated upon the gravel outside, Mrs. Wrayburn came into the hall to receive her guests. It was a great square hall, floored and panelled with dark polished oak, and softly lighted by small hanging lamps of ruby-tinted glass. To come in out of the keen autumn evening to this dim mysterious place, and be met by this beautiful woman in glistening raiment, gave quite an Arabian Nights sort of feeling.

“Christina, here are Mary and Lawrence,” Colonel Wrayburn said, with a great effort

to "speak the words trippingly," and make it appear that all were quite at ease, when the very reverse was the fact.

The "dark ladye," whose portrait still hung upon the wall at Swanneck, kissed Mary, and, with smiling grace, gave her hand to her quondam lover.

She was certainly quite handsome enough, this queenly, almond-eyed, silky-haired Christina, to turn the heads of men and stir up strife between them. If Loxdale could have seen her when he remarked that women, unlike wine, did not improve by maturing, he might perhaps have changed his opinion. Wrayburn saw, with secret pleasure mingled with defiance, that she was far lovelier now than when that youthful picture was done. Poor Mary saw it also, and, mindful of her own faded face, took particular pains with her toilet, that her husband's taste might be justified in the eyes of his friends. They might at least allow she was grace-

ful and elegant, if colourless and rather *pasée*.

Christina, wise in her generation, had foreseen the awkwardness of a quiet family dinner on this first evening. Therefore she had decided to make it a dinner-party, calling her friends and neighbours together as to a gratulatory feast.

When Wrayburn entered the drawing-room, the guests were already assembled, and he recognized several old friends. Sir Geoffrey Penruddock, Mr. Tredgold the banker, and old Squire Ridout were there. The old doctor, and the new rector, a young baronet newly come to his lands, and a few others with their accompanying womenkind, made up the party. All the older guests knew Wrayburn's history, and assumed they knew the motives which had urged him to alienate himself from his family for so long a time. When they sat down to dinner, he found the current of their

curiosity setting towards him as naturally as a river finds its way to the sea. It was Sir Geoffrey who opened the ball.

“Well, Lawrence,” he said, “and how do you get on with your farming?”

“I have not experimented,” Wrayburn replied, “unless you can call growing a few vegetables farming.”

Sir Geoffrey glanced at their host. “I was under the impression your brother was farming,” he said.

“I was under that impression myself,” Colonel Wrayburn replied. “But it seems he has sunk his money in land from which he has had not the slightest return.”

“I have five hundred acres of forest land,” Wrayburn explained. “The labour and expense of clearing would be more than the thing is worth. The soil is poor, the ground too elevated and uneven. My neighbours farm land in more sheltered positions along the valley.”

"Pity you made such a bad selection. Couldn't you change?"

"I don't want to. The picturesque position was what attracted me, not its agricultural value. I've no taste for farming, and the fact that it is unsuitable relieves me from any scruples I might feel in holding land without making it produce something."

"The timber should be valuable," Mr. Tredgold remarked.

"Yes; it's mostly Oregon pine, with a sprinkling of cedar, larch, cotton-wood, and so on."

"Isn't the life dreadfully rough?" asked Miss Penruddock, who sat beside him.

"Rough in the sense of having to do everything for yourself. But that tends to simplify matters wonderfully. The life is not actually rougher than a soldier's."

"But then the long winters, and the intense cold, how dreadful they must be!"

"We have plenty of ice and snow, plenty

of rain too sometimes. But from spring till the end of autumn the climate is delightful; cloudless skies, clear atmosphere, hot summer days with fine cool nights: nothing could be pleasanter."

"You bring up a good report of the land."

"It is a good land. A man can live there with less worry and labour than in any place I've yet seen. There's abundance of everything—fish, flesh, and fowl, no lack of fuel, and plenty of good water."

"Yes," said Mr. Tredgold, approvingly, "I believe it's a fine country; all it wants is development."

"When that begins in good earnest, the days of peace and comfort will be ended," said Wrayburn.

"But surely," Mr. Tredgold replied, "when a country is known to be full of forest and mineral wealth, it was intended it should be developed."

"I'm not a Daniel, to decipher the handwriting upon the wall," Wrayburn answered, smiling.

"But you can read the history of the world, and see for yourself that when nations become exhausted and over-crowded at home, their natural tendency is to spread abroad, and plant fresh roots in other lands. It's only by such means civilization is advanced."

"The sand of centuries covers many of those freshly planted nations, and the world begins over again where they began, not where they left off."

"What of that?" said Squire Ridout. "You might as well say a man's youth and prime are to count for nothing because he grows old and feeble as his forefathers did, and finally dies. At that rate we should all fold our hands, develop nothing, and drift back to inevitable barbarism."

"Perhaps," said Wrayburn. "But I hardly think the desire to advance civilization

has led people into other lands. What brought the Gothic nations to the shores of the Mediterranean ? what devastated India ? what took the early adventurers to America ? what is taking us into Africa now ? Is it that we may civilize ? or is it the accursed love of gold ? ”

“ Men naturally go where there is something to reward them for going,” Colonel Wrayburn broke in. “ I never heard of any people, unless the Pilgrim Fathers, or Mormons, or similar fanatics, settling down in places offering no inducement to them whatever.”

“ Isn't that just what I say ? Covetousness makes men feel called upon to develop this, and utilize that, and spread themselves abroad. Civilizing and humanizing are not the same thing, though the words are used as if they were synonymous.”

“ Well,” said Mr. Tredgold, “ I think you must allow that, wherever our country-

men have gone, they have carried the blessings of humanity and enlightenment. I suppose you believe in education, Lawrence ?”

“Yes, up to a certain degree. But I think it's quite possible for people to be over-educated—beyond an equilibrium, I mean. And you must remember that a very high standard of education and refinement can only benefit one portion of the community, while it means the whole or partial enslavement of another portion.”

“That cannot be. A refinement, to be genuine, should not be the exclusive possession of any one class, but should permeate all classes.”

“It should, but does not, and cannot. Wants increase so fast that work grows harder and harder, and there is no leisure to cultivate the graces of life. Slave-holding, in one form or another, has always been essential in civilized states.”

“Slave-holding is totally inconsistent with humanity,” said Sir Geoffrey, uttering the commonplace with a magisterial air. “But we, who hold no slaves, are both civilized and humane.”

“You have no visible slave-market,” Wrayburn replied. “It’s concealed behind the share-list, and calls itself Capital. To it Labour sells itself—often body and soul—for a modicum of daily bread.”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed Sir Geoffrey, impatiently. “That’s a monstrous exaggeration of simple supply and demand. You can’t have much knowledge of the present state of the labour-market, and the scale of wages; or perhaps you’re turned Socialist?”

“No,” Wrayburn answered good-humouredly; “Socialism is one of those pretty bubbles that rise with all manner of brilliant hues, then suddenly collapse. You can deduce no theory from that which is practically

unworkable, so the whole thing begins and ends in speech."

"But supposing Mr. Wrayburn's version of our social arrangements to be the correct one," put in Dr. Gibney, the rector, "would it not be an additional reason for finding new industries abroad for our over-burdened people?"

"And where more suitably than in our own colonies, which are the natural heritage of the people?" added Colonel Wrayburn.

"As you've made your bed, so you must lie on it," said Wrayburn. "The colonies don't choose to regard themselves as a convenient dumping-ground for your surplus refuse. Why should they?"

Sitting opposite, but a little lower down the table, was a young man in clerical dress. He had attentively listened to the general conversation, though somewhat hindered by the lightly rippling chatter and laughter of the fledgling baronet and a young lady sitting

beside him. This young man had a pale, high-bred face of the ascetic type, and looked as if he might be acquainted with Toynbee Hall.

“If you could come to us for a month,” he said, in a clear, penetrating voice, directing his remarks to Wrayburn, “I think you would not grudge our unfortunate people a share in the good things over yonder—the peace and plenty you have described.”

“Mr. Audyn is attached to an East End mission,” Christina explained; and Wrayburn made a little bow in acknowledgment of the information.

“What should I see if I went to you?” he said.

“You would see thousands steeped all their lives long in hopeless poverty, familiarized from the cradle with squalor and profligacy; their home-life a degradation in itself, herding together like beasts; under-bidding one another on every hand for shameful wages;

morally and spiritually as dark and ignorant as any savages."

"And you think these people would get salvation by unlimited emigration to the natural heritage?"

"If you went in and out among them as I have done for the past year, if you knew how impossible it is to make the smallest impression on such a mass of sin and misery, you would welcome anything, however vague, that would even reduce the numbers, and give a better chance to those left behind."

"No doubt. And it might be easier to tackle the devil in particles rather than in the lump," Wrayburn said, with a quaint smile. "Your experience seems to prove my version was not so exaggerated as Sir Geoffrey says, but it's hardly flattering to yourself. The flock is not very amenable to the crook, apparently."

"Ah, Mr. Wrayburn, it is easy for the laity

to jeer at the clergy, but they little know the magnitude of their task."

"I don't quite believe in its magnitude. Of course, if a field is left idle for years, the task of clearing away weeds and rubbish will be much greater than if it had been attended to all along."

"You mean that the clergy have neglected the people?" young Audyn asked quickly.

"No; I should say, rather, they had neglected themselves."

"I don't quite understand."

"I would merely suggest that perhaps you exhaust yourselves by beginning at the wrong end."

"That we should denounce the rich, the luxurious, and the cultured, instead of the poor and ignorant?"

"Why denounce any one? To preach a Jeremiad is easy enough. It requires no real sacrifice to cry, 'Woe to the wicked city.'

But deal justly, love mercy, walk humbly, and see where they'll lead you to."

"Oh, we all know that if we tried harder to practise what we believe, the world might be a very different place," sighed Audyn.

"I should say, if we all really believed what we profess to practise, it might be a very different place," said Wrayburn.

"And I should say, only throw in enough 'if,' and you can accomplish anything," said the bland rector.

"But really, to come back to the main question," said Mr. Tredgold, "though many things look hopeless enough, no one can deny that upon the whole the condition of the masses is vastly improved. Look at the legislation of even the last twenty years—the Education Acts, the Factory Acts, the Public Health Acts, the Employers' Liability Acts, besides the Acts relating to children, and to married women and their property. No one can say that our legislation has over-

looked the poor and lowly, or neglected the weak and helpless. The whole tendency of public feeling is towards humanity. Can you dispute that, Lawrence ? ”

“ No, sir ; I would go even further, and say you give tithes of all you possess, and if you wrong any man you restore fourfold. For instance, when those wicked publicans have demoralized a neighbourhood sufficiently, the big brewer or distiller who supplied the publican steps forward to restore morality by promoting a love of the fine arts, or by building churches or establishing missions. He is then called a public benefactor, and given a peerage, and the bishops and archbishops who sit at his feasts can’t open their mouths against him. So the attention of every one is directed to those sons of Belial who drank his pints and quarts, and many are the attempts made to drag them forcibly out of the lower pit.”

“ You’re severe, aren’t you ? ” Mr. Tred-

gold said, in a tone of remonstrance, for he dabbled largely in polite philanthropy himself. "But, though you paraphrase the passage to our disadvantage, you won't persuade me we've all got a lie in our right hand."

"Anything touching the national vice is necessarily a sore subject," Dr. Gibney observed smoothly, with the air of one who has a proprietary right in one healing plaster, which he is accustomed to apply indiscriminately to all the unsightly wounds coming under his professional observation. "But Mr. Tredgold is right; we have undoubtedly made great advances. We don't imprison men for debt now, or keep them rotting for years; nor do we execute them publicly, or for any crime save one. Every effort is made to bring wholesome literature within the reach of all; to share the good things of life with the less fortunate. Where will you now find a hospital, workhouse, or

ragged-school without its Christmas-tree and feast? or a poor neighbourhood without its soup-kitchen, its mothers' meetings, its sewing-class, its penny bank, its temperance lectures?"

"To be sure," said the choleric old high Tory, Sir Geoffrey. "And think of the material you have to work upon — the thriftless improvident habits of the people, their early marriages, their extravagance and childish want of thought, their Radical froth, and ignorant levelling theories! These people don't want to raise themselves. They want to bring every one down to their own level, to get the benefit of everything for which others laboured. If it were not that the upper classes are animated by the humane resolve that elevated they shall be, they would wallow contentedly enough in their sty."

"An unregenerate, carnally minded people!" murmured Wrayburn.

“ Ah ! you may scoff, Master Lawrence,” said Sir Geoffrey, energetically, “ but you’ve led the life of a spectator, and have not a practical man’s experience.”

“ The practical man’s experience seems similar to the Lincolnshire farmer’s—‘ the poor in a lump is bad,’ ” returned Wrayburn ; “ but shiftless habits are not of necessity the outcome of vice.”

“ You surely won’t say they are the outcome of virtue ? ” exclaimed Colonel Wrayburn. “ It’s not so much the actual poverty as the objectional habits and modes of life—the readiness with which they fall into disorder and general incoherency—that produce the wretchedness and immorality among these people.”

A slow smile crossed Wrayburn’s face, and the light in his eyes became lambent. He took a survey of the handsome room, the smartly dressed company, the well-appointed table, the silent, assiduous footmen.

“There was a man much given to dreaming,” he said carelessly, “who took to himself a wife under the most discouraging circumstances; and that woman managed so badly, that her Child was born in a stable. That’s bad enough—cattle and cattle-drovers for your first experience! But another dream gave a moonlight flitting into safer quarters. More dreaming brought them wandering back again. Heaven only knows how they picked up a living, but there seems to have been enough and to spare of disorder and general incoherency before they hit upon Nazareth.”

There was a chilling pause when he ceased. His words had not the sound of anything they were accustomed to; and, in truth, they were not a little scandalized by his tone of levity.

With the recklessness of a nervous man, who, having plunged in, strikes out wildly, Wrayburn went on again.

“The Child grew to be a Man, and was dying the death of a criminal, when He recognized His mother among the mob watching the execution. It was too late in the day for penny banks, so He relegated her to the care of His friend—hampered him, as we should say now, with a responsibility for which He should have made proper provision during His own lifetime. But the illogical friend, without more ado, took her to his own home—not a very smart home presumably. We should hardly go to such scrambling, shiftless people to look for virtue. Yet, while the objectionable habits of the great unwashed have sunk into convenient obscurity, the cross itself has become more than ever fashionable as the symbol of the hope of Christendom. How do you account for it?”

“Your mode of dealing with sacred subjects is as off-handed as a Salvation Army officer’s,” said the smiling rector, who did

not in the least perceive that a shy man will often conceal his really deep feelings under an assumed frivolity, as a girl pretends to be unconscious of her lover's approach by talking and laughing immoderately with her companions. "But you have pointed to a very special self-sacrifice from which it is impossible to draw example, or point to any parallel case—unless indeed it may be found in the early monastic orders. But, much as I appreciate the work of monasticism and sympathize with its spirit, I cannot but regard its revival in our day as an anachronism. Legislation, not monasticism, is what we must look to now. And, for my own part, I think our legislative efforts are an entire success. At this present moment England is not only the most Christianized country in Europe, but she is *the* Christianizing influence of the world."

"Then God help the world!" said Wrayburn, turning his attention to his dinner

with an air of "the words of Job are ended."

"You don't agree with that proposition, Mr. Wrayburn?"

"No; I don't quite see how England can give to the world what she hasn't got herself."

"Why, you irreconcilable! what is it you object to now?" laughed his brother.

"I object to this supposed alliance of legislation with religion. In my humble opinion it has no existence."

"You don't mean to say, in the teeth of patent facts, that the principles by which we are governed are not Christian principles?" said Sir Geoffrey, pompously.

"Even in the teeth of *patented* facts, that is exactly what I mean to say," answered Wrayburn, enjoying the effects of the squib he had sent crackling around the polite circle.

"Will you point to any one public act sanctioned by the unanimous voice of the

people, which is directly opposed to the spirit of Christianity?" Mr. Tredgold asked, with grave grandiloquence.

"What do you say to your standing army?"

"I say it is the smallest of any first-class power."

"That has nothing to do with it. England being permeated by the spirit of Christianity, I want to know why it is that millions yearly are spent on over-finished ironclads? Why any man perfecting some new species of villainous weapon is patted on the back and rewarded? Why public speakers, when they ramp about 'preparedness for war,' are cheered to the echo?"

"I suppose," said Sir Geoffrey, with lofty disdain, "that you'd disband the whole army, and answer our enemies by homiletics?"

"What I personally would do is not to the point," said Wrayburn, lightly. "Personally I don't live in the valley of the shadow of

Bogey, and should want to know the reason why if I did."

"Mr. Wrayburn has such a Platonic admiration for pure virtue that he looks with great disfavour on our matter-of-fact, utilitarian ways," said the rector, in a bantering tone.

"Tell me, Lawrence," said Mr. Tredgold, "is it more sinful to take life by Martini-Henris, Gatlings, or torpedoes than by Roman broadswords or Saxon arrows?"

"Yes, I think it is," said the other, stoutly. "To perfect any system of mere destruction seems to me a retrograde step. Then the Roman fought under a pagan discipline which taught him to regard martial courage as the first and highest virtue. And the Saxon can no more be blamed for his skill in archery than for his belief in magic and witchcraft; both were part of the nation's childhood. But there's something absurd and contemptible in the sight of all Europe draining the very

heart out of its peoples by taxation, armed to the teeth, and living in the fear of it knows not what, yet prating all the time about the blessings of civilization and enlightenment."

"Well, of course that's a very wide subject, and men view it altogether according to their political opinions," said Mr. Tredgold. "There may be some apparent inconsistency in that, but it's only one thing."

"War is general injury. If individual injury is any better, what do you say to your African merchants? Are they a fair sample of what the Christianized spirit can do for one? They're all 'honourable men;' carry round your alms-bags; give generous subscriptions to good works; belong to the very class which of all others is supposed to be a very bulwark of religion. And they pay for their ivory and palm-oil in rotten rifles and 'blue ruin,' that the heathen may go back to his people and show them what great things the Lord hath done for him by blow-

ing himself or drinking himself into kingdom come."

"It's not done with that purpose," said Mr. Tredgold, much shocked. "Payment in kind is necessary with people to whom money is useless, though Manchester goods and glass beads are valuable."

"Certainly," Wrayburn agreed; "every churchwarden knows that 'first shot,' well mixed with sundry other chemicals, is a most wholesome drink in the tropics. And any well-disposed heathen might utilize a rifle that was no good for shooting neighbours with as the family teraph. If he realized all his privileges, he might even have a very respectable baldischino by draping the Manchester goods around it."

"But the African merchants are only a class, and quite a small class," said Colonel Wrayburn a little uneasily, fearing his brother's reckless speeches would beget more than a pleasant degree of friction.

"I only happened to hit upon them," Wrayburn replied innocently.

"Don't get him to hit upon any more," laughed Sir Geoffrey, "or we shall all be pilloried in turn."

"No, no," protested Wrayburn, with re-awakened diffidence; "what right have I to pillory any one? But the awfully serious views of life taken here in England, and the levity with which all sorts of immoral ideas and vicious practice are made to fit in and work along with the serious views, strikes me as about the purest bit of humbug you'll find anywhere."

"Well, Lawrence," said Squire Ridout, "I always understood you were intended for the Bar, but I think divinity might have been more in your line than jurisprudence."

"By no means," said Wrayburn, colouring up. "It would be hard to say of which subject I know least, and I've never posed as a religious man. Heaven forbid!"

But the remark made him feel foolish, and he was heartily glad when the dinner came to an end.

He was experiencing all the vexation which a modest man feels when he has been drawn into a debate, and has worn his "heart upon his sleeve for daws to peck at." Moreover, his whole mind was in revolt. Everything was dreadfully genteel, no doubt, but it did not seem to compensate for the want of kindly, unaffected cordiality.

He thought of the dinner-parties in old days, in the comfortable room—simply served dinners, with only one servant in attendance. How far different had things been if after seven years of absence he had come back to his father! That father would have beamed upon his son with joyful, affectionate welcome; the best bottle of wine in the house would have been brought to light to drink the wanderer's health in. He would have sat up half the night to hear and to

tell all that had happened during their separation; the whole house would have diffused a cheery salutation. All this had been in his mind while he sat girding at this pompous feast, obstinately maintaining men might be civilized and yet lack everything.

"Lawrence," Mary said, when they were alone later on, "do you intend to go out often against Philistia, armed only with a sling and a few smooth stones? If so, I fancy you'll find it rather fatiguing."

Wrayburn, who was sitting somewhat moodily by the fire, looked round with a deprecating expression.

"I made a fool of myself to-night, Mary; but you needn't remind me of it," he said.

"No, I don't think you did, though I can't say I agree with all you said. If I were you I'd go and smoke a calumet with your brother, and be more friendly with him."

“Let him be friendly with me; it’s his business,” he retorted. “But they are all in bed long ago. This house, you must understand, moves by clockwork. Ted rises at six, gets all his letters written, prayers at eight, breakfast at half-past eight; to-morrow, being Sunday, church at eleven. Do people not find life short and small enough that they must cut it all up into squares, and spend their time in hopping from square to square?”

“They haven’t the monopoly of early rising. You can get up very early yourself when you like.”

“But I should die of weariness if I had to rise at a certain hour, and go through a form of prayer at another certain hour every day, whether I felt inclined for it or not.”

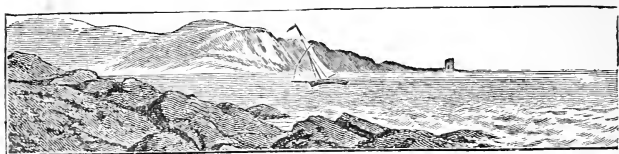
“Punctuality and regularity are among the penalties of greatness,” said Mary, playfully. “A *pauvre diable* or a street Arab can do as he pleases.”

“Christina manages everything by routine, and routine is my mortal aversion,” he said, rising and stretching himself with the languor of extreme boredom.

“Admirable Christina!” said Mary. “How she would have cured all your erratic ways!”

Wrayburn drew up the blind and looked out. “It’s a lovely night,” he said. “There’s a full moon, and the tide is in. I’ll go down and have a bathe.”

Going into his dressing-room, he changed his coat, returned in a moment with a couple of towels in his hand, and went downstairs. Mary heard the sound of a heavy bar being withdrawn from across the hall door, and presently a few pebbles rattled against the window. Glancing out, she saw his figure, illumined by the cold ethereal splendour of the moonlight, casting a long black shadow upon the grass behind him. With a wave of the hand he blew her a kiss, and turned swiftly away to forget his anger amid the peaceable voices of the sea and the night.



CHAPTER VI.

THE day following was Sunday. The two women went to church ; but the two men remained behind, and spent the morning in sauntering about old familiar places as seven or eight years before they had sauntered. At that time their souls had been knit together as the souls of David and Jonathan. Since then mutual mistrust had sundered them, and the gulf could never be quite bridged over ; but they were very civil and pleasant one to the other.

The two brothers were remarkably alike. Both were tall ; and, though Edward Wrayburn was a slighter, less well-set-up man than

his brother, he had the same soft, deep, mellow voice, the same healthy, open-air look, crisp dark hair, and dark grey eyes. But his features were handsomer, his manners more conventionally polished.

Lawrence was taken round to see all the improvements which had been made during his absence.

"You have a lot of glass here," he observed to the head gardener.

"Yes, sir ; too much," the man returned. "We grow peaches, and pines, and melons. Then there's the vinery and the palm-house, and the orchid-house, besides the conservatory and the outside grounds to look after. I've eight men under me, but it's not near enough to keep this place as it ought to be kept."

"Come along," Colonel Wrayburn said, in a laughing undertone. "He's a gem of a gardener—it's his hobby—but he's always growling for more men. If he had twenty

he would still say they weren't enough to keep things as they should be kept."

They went to have a look at the new stables, and then turned into the orchard—that orchard in which they had both dreamed so many dreams and planned so many boyish schemes. For most of the old trees the fiat had gone forth, "Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?" In their places new trees, with fashionable reputations in the botanical world, had been planted in straight rows, the space between being economically filled in with raspberry and currant bushes. Yes, that gardener knew his work. Fifty times more fruit would be produced here than in that old bosky wilderness of an orchard. But never could it produce such another crop of happy, lasting memories.

They came round again to the trim Italian garden, with its ever-flashing fountains, its ever-smiling nymphs and naiads uplifting their white limbs into the air.

Leaning on one of the balustrades, Lawrence looked around him with cold approval, thinking of the sweet-scented, old-fashioned gardens his father used to call his "joyaunce" and his "pleasaunce;" of the old lichen-covered house with its homely growths of rose and jasmine and Virginia creeper.

"I should like it all a good deal better, Ted, if you had left more of my father's handiwork untouched," he said. "It wasn't such bad work."

"I might have wished to leave more of it untouched myself," Colonel Wrayburn replied. "But once you begin to build and alter, you're pushed on in spite of yourself. Architects get huffy if their plans are not properly carried out; and once the stream of demolition begins you can't tell where it will stop."

"I don't blame you for wishing to leave some traces of your own hand. I should

do the same were I in your place. But I wouldn't pull up all the old landmarks."

His heart was a little oppressed, as if instead of a living presence he had found a handsome tomb. But he said no more. They went out into the park, and strolled slowly across the smooth turf under the autumn-tinted elm trees.

"It's pretty from here, isn't it?" Colonel Wrayburn remarked.

The ground whereon they stood was slightly elevated. Before them the country spread wide, fair, and peaceful, with a shimmer of the silvery sea visible between the trees.

"This will all be yours some day, Lawrence."

"Some day is one of the days that never dawn. You may be able to divide your property among half a dozen sons yet."

"I think not. If I'm childless at the end of seven years, it's likely I'll remain childless

to the end of the chapter. It's a keen disappointment to Christina; but I don't know that it is to me. I would rather you had your turn."

"You talk as if you were ready to drop into your grave to-morrow. Do you forget that you are only three years older than myself?"

"No, I don't forget; nor am I trying to forecast the future. You might die first, or we might both live to be old grey-headed men. But if I should happen to go first the place will be yours, and for that reason I would like you to take more interest in it."

"My dear fellow, I take the greatest interest."

"As a stranger examining some new thing. I mean a personal interest. I wish you'd be frank with me, and tell me what are your plans for the future."

"I have no plans."

"That's nonsense. No one but a fool would marry a wife without some definite knowledge of the position he was going to offer her."

"Then you have before you a specimen of the genus fool."

"Some years ago, if you remember, I wanted you to have five hundred a year out of the property, and you refused it. Will you, for your wife's sake, let me renew the offer now, making it seven instead of five? With your own money that would give you a thousand. It's not a big income; but you could live respectably on it, and I'll furnish a town house for you, if you'll go into Parliament, and really settle down and try to make a position."

Wrayburn looked at his brother incredulously. "Go into Parliament?" he said.

"Yes; why not? In the old days it was always looked upon as a settled thing."

"A good many things in the old days

were looked upon as settled which never came to pass, for all that."

There was a sharp point in the words that pricked Colonel Wrayburn, but he went on without affecting to notice it.

"You don't lack brains, Lawrence; all you want is the determination to give up this idle drifting which is ruinous to you, and the energy to concentrate your mind on some practical work."

Lawrence was silent. Well might he be! The size of the canvas and the ambitious design so suddenly unfolded filled him with amazement. From Swanneck to a place in the first legislative assembly in the world; from the dim background of utter obscurity to a share in all the light and leading of the day; from poverty and comparative indifference to comfort and responsibility! A change! A sudden development! Too sudden, perhaps, to be healthy; too gourd-like in its rapid growth.

"But I know nothing of politics," he objected. "I don't even know what I am."

"What party you belong to, do you mean? Why, of course you're Conservative—we all are."

"And suppose I tried, and didn't get in?"

"You'd wait awhile, and try elsewhere."

"And become a professional carpet-bagger."

"Certainly not; but you can't enter the House till you get a seat somewhere."

"I've not the least intention, Ted, of hawking myself about the country like a political barrel-organ, grinding out tunes to the order of some Conservative Association."

"No, no," said Colonel Wrayburn, smoothly, and talked on fluently, while his brother listened confusedly and caught detached sentences about "Tredgold said last night—assistant under-secretaryship—great influence with a Conservative government—Majoribanks go to the peers when his father dies

—last legs—seat vacant—name well known in the borough—sure to be returned ;” but it all sounded like the sound of waves on the seashore, or traffic on a distant high-road.

One thing was plain—they were no dreamers, these Sanclerc people. They had added house to house, and land to land ; had pulled down old barns and built themselves new ones, till their own position looked tolerably secure and comfortable. And now they were ready with a practical plan for improving the condition of this destitute brother, setting him on his legs, and making him march forward under a successful banner. The bait was gaudy—very gaudy, and he was but human ; he felt attracted, tempted. The love of mastery was as strong in him as in other men—perhaps stronger. He had a far better gauge of his own abilities than the people who told him he underrated them, and knew better what reason he had to crucify himself so mercilessly as he had

done. The "vaulting ambition" and overbearing will which had once made him work with might and main, with the one sole intention of overtopping his fellows, were not dead yet. Nay, they were very much alive. But that love of power he had turned against himself instead of against the world. The resolute will had compelled him to become "a new man" whether he liked it or not, and in no half-hearted way. Had he been bad, he would have been bad in the same thoroughgoing fashion; there were no halfway houses for him. In no self-scorn, but with calm determination, he had driven every nail home into the unyielding flesh. But his secrets were his own. He never tried to disabuse people's minds of the idea that he was an idle fellow, shirking responsibility by leading an easy life, agreeable to himself, if narrow in its limits. His responsibilities and aims were not the responsibilities of others, but it was not his

business to be for ever pointing out wherein lay the distinction.

And now he felt all the old consciousness of power, and lust for power, as strong as ever within him. He hardly heard his brother's words, but he saw very clearly a vision of it all—the busy committee-rooms, the anxious election agents, the canvassers, the nominators, the Conservative colours, the flaring placards, the gags and war-cries, the crowded meetings, the patriotic speeches, the hooting and cheering, the running to and fro and excitement, the declaration of the poll, the bands playing “Rule, Britannia,” and the discomfiture of the other candidate, the brave speeches bawled out at midnight, the name of Lawrence Wrayburn inextricably mixed up with “the interests of this extended empire,” the wild cheering of the crowd and congratulations of weary but jubilant supporters. Of marching up the floor of the House of Commons to take the oath; of

driving down to the House with Mary in her own smart little carriage; of official receptions, fashionable *réunions*, and artistic *soirées*; of Mary in pretty evening dresses like that in which she had looked so well last night; of Mr. Vanburgh comforted in his old age by a sail on the flowing tide of this prosperity; of a respect and deference to himself not paid to him now; of a power and influence not attaching to him now. Verily a wonderful change!

“It can’t be expected that I’m to have all this for nothing, like another Marquis of Carrabas. What am I to give in return?” he asked.

“You’ll give yourself—your time, talents, and energies.”

“And how will they be employed?”

“On behalf of your constituents mainly.”

It struck Lawrence that the constituents were regarded simply as a *pis-aller*, a convenient back on which to hoist himself.

“And out of some thirty millions of people, can no other man be found to represent them than a penniless man fresh from a remote colonial settlement? I should say there’s something shaky in the selection.”

“For Heaven’s sake, Lawrence, don’t begin to spin cobwebs out of your own inside.”

“I’m not given to cobweb-spinning.”

Colonel Wrayburn thought it might be well to let so much as he had said sink down into Lawrence’s mind, and there fructify. So he passed his hand through his brother’s arm, and twirled his cane as he went along, humming a little tune. Lawrence, with his hat pushed back on his head, and his hands deep in his trouser-pockets, sauntered with him in silence, feeling very uncomfortable. For this man had that most pernicious addition to a man’s natural hindrances—a conscience. Even as a boy he had been troubled with it, and in growing to man’s estate he had not outgrown it. He was so

simply direct in his way of looking at things, so stupidly blind in accepting even the disadvantageous consequences of such directness, that he had not been able to fine down his conscience by a gradual process, or to trample upon it by sudden violence, or even to harden it into a good tough friend and supporter. It was his master, and arose within him now, accusing him of jobbery.

“When a cleric is offered a living with a better stipend, and he begins to talk of being ‘called to another portion of the Lord’s vineyard,’ or ‘finding an increased sphere of usefulness,’ we ridicule him and call him a humbug,” he said, after a long silence. “Is it any more respectable and less ridiculous when a layman does the same thing, only in another way?”

“A clergyman puts up to be a teacher and leader,” the other replied, “and should not abuse us for having mercenary motives if he’s tinged with the same himself.”

“And surely a man who puts up to be a representative of the people assumes a leadership. But he can’t call upon them to be pure if he himself is corrupt. If he does he’s a most confounded humbug, and his influence is nullified from the first.”

It was a gaudy bait, a pretty, tempting bait, and for the moment it had tempted him. But he knew well there was a price to pay. The more he got the heavier would be the price. It might be he would have to give his independence of action, his freedom of speech, his private opinions, his ease of conscience—all, in fact, that makes manhood worth having.

“He would be a most confounded humbug,” he repeated slowly, “and I’m not going to be that to please myself, or you, or any other man, for the sake of writing M.P. after my name. If my position can only be improved by selling myself to a party, it had better remain unimproved.”

"You would not be selling yourself to a party, my dear fellow."

"Yes, I should. I know very little of political life. But I've read and observed enough to know that if I began to probe I should very soon get gravelled ; and if I didn't probe, I should merely be one of a row of puppets dancing at the end of the strings held by the wire-pullers, and I'm not vain enough to covet such a flattering *rôle*."

"You don't seem to have much faith in the purity of public life," the elder brother said, with gentle mockery.

"I have this much faith," the younger answered. "I believe nature's absorbent and reproductive powers are so great that in public life, as elsewhere, a great deal of very worthless old rubbish is worked up into very good new serviceable garments, just as these rotten leaves are worked up by a tedious process into new green leaves. An

excellent property in nature ! Still, I may not wish to be a rotten leaf."

"Perhaps, when you have talked things over with Mary, she may make you alter your views—wives have that faculty."

"I may, or may not, talk it over with her. But, much as I love my wife, nothing she could say can induce me to believe it would be worth my while to pull down the work of the last five or six years."

"You don't seem to have constructed anything of such magnitude that you need be afraid to pull it down," Colonel Wrayburn said, with mild contempt.

"If it contents me, you needn't disparage it because it doesn't happen to suit you."

"Then, you won't accept my offer?"

"No, Ted ; thanks all the same, but I can't accept it."

"*Ultimus Romanorum !*" said Colonel Wrayburn.

As they entered the house the gong for luncheon was resounding through the hall.

"I admire your oak floors immensely, Ted," said Lawrence. "But my little larch floors at Swanneck are a finer colour."

"Hang Swanneck!" Colonel Wrayburn said viciously. "I wish you had never seen the odious place. It has been the ruin of you, and ended everything."

"Hang it with all your heart if you feel it does you good, old man," laughed the other. "But blessed be the soil of Swanneck!"





CHAPTER VII.

IN the evening Wrayburn said to his wife, "Come for a stroll, Mary; there will be plenty of time before dinner."

"You have been strolling all day," Mary answered, with a smile; but she rose at once to comply with his request.

The path they took led towards the churchyard, through a narrow grove of faded but still leafy trees. The churchyard lay in a hollow, entered at either end by a flight of steps leading down from the road. The swelling roll of the organ, and the sound of voices chanting, as they approached, was

succeeded by the indistinct tones of a single voice intoning the prayers, for, evening service was going on inside.

They went slowly up the path, pausing now and again to read some ancient epitaph, until at the upper end Wrayburn stepped across the grass.

"This is where the Wrayburns 'give their bodies to the family mould,'" said he.

It was a vault, bricked up and railed round as vaults are usually. Within the railings was a huge flat stone, so covered with inscriptions that small marble panels had been let in around the base. Wrayburn pointed to one of these, and Mary read, "Sacred to the beloved memory of Margaret Wrayburn, who departed this life in her 23rd year." Then followed the date of her death and similar words, "Also of Edward Lawrence Wrayburn, who departed this life in his 51st year;" and under the date a line from the Book of Wisdom — "The souls of the

righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them."

"Your father and mother?" Mary asked; and Wrayburn nodded his head.

"Poor girl! What a short life she had! You don't remember her?"

"No; she died while I was quite an infant," he replied, in the easy tone of a man speaking of a loss from which he has never consciously suffered.

"And he was only middle-aged when he died," Mary said.

"Yes; but if you glance along this stone you'll see we have not been long-lived people. Few of us have attained the three-score years and ten."

"I wonder very much at that. This must be such a healthy place; and you look strong men."

"We've used ourselves up quickly, I suppose. And there has been more than a fair allowance of violent deaths among us—

deaths from 'lightning and tempest,' falls from horses, and drowning. We must have been an unlucky or a reckless lot."

As they turned and went slowly away, Mary pointed to the wreaths of fresh flowers lying on many graves.

"Yes," he said, "it's a pretty custom; but it doesn't mean much. People find a melancholy pleasure in coming to and fro with flowers. But you seldom find them on the graves of those long dead. Life is short, but memory is shorter. In Wales, where they have Flowering Sunday, it is a scene of beastly drunkenness. It wouldn't give me any satisfaction to know that when I was dead people would come strewing flowers over me."

"Not even if I put them there?"

"Not even if you put them there. The mouldering dust would have no knowledge of your presence. But I fancy, in whatever part of the universe I--the living part of

me—might be, I should know whether my real grave was in the heart of the woman I loved; whether she kept my memory green, and was faithful to it.”

“Don’t, Lawrence,” cried Mary, piteously.

“Why not?” he said laughingly. “We must all die some day; that is one of the few things we are quite certain about. There’s nothing so commonplace as death—unless it is birth. And they both have such ceaseless repetition that the two greatest mysteries of life cause less wonderment than its ordinary accidents.”

They left the churchyard, and turned away to the shore.

Presently he said, as if in continuance of some thought, “And it’s odd how, Christian or pagan, all seem to get back to the one old legend.”

“What legend?” said Mary.

“Ours is the Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden legend. Theirs was Saturn,

the father of the gods, and Cybele his wife, the all-fruitful mother, Cœlus and Terra, Isis and Osiris, and heaven knows how many more; but all with the one idea running through them—Woman symbolizing the openly seen productive power of earth, Man the unseen creative power of heaven; the two in marriage forming the nature of deity in whom the dual powers are one, and symbolizing a state of highest unity and perfectness. I often thought of that when we were in London, if I happened to take a short cut through back streets, and saw the troops of dirty, neglected children scattered about as if no one cared to claim ownership in them. Yet exactly the same powers had unconsciously gone to the making of each one of those little creatures squatting in the gutter as brought this world out of the void and made it fruitful. It behoves a man to think twice, though, before he begins to create man in his own likeness, lest when

he comes to look upon his work he shall find that it is *not* good."

Mary was patient of Wrayburn's monologues, as some wives would not have been. The habit of reverie had grown upon him in his solitary life. Now that he had a wife as companion his reveries glided imperceptibly into speech, as a secluded stream in its windings glides from the dim secrecy of concealing rock or overhanging thicket into the open daylight and free air. She loved him well enough to feel a pleasure in being the sole recipient of his meandering thoughts.

As they came out upon the shore the sun was setting, and they sat down upon the rocks to watch it. Like a globe on fire it sank below the horizon, making sea and sky aflame with a glory of crimson and gold. Right in the heart of this splendour floated two clouds, beautiful as two brooding angels, their sharply defined edges like outspread glistening wings, all misty purple and golden

above, all rosy beneath, reflecting the dazzling glow from that glittering windless sea. Every moment these clouds changed and lessened, until they became thin flakes of purple-grey lying in narrow bars across an orange sky. As the transient after-glow faded it was succeeded by a more ethereal brightness, the sky growing ever clearer and clearer as it paled, and changed through every gradation of purest yellow to a weird and vivid green.

“Oh, what a vision ! but a vision only ;
Can heart of man embrace illimitable nature ?”

Wrayburn had been out of spirits all the afternoon, as was only natural. For, when the momentary exaltation of successfully borne temptation has passed, then follows a vague regret that some particular quality in ourselves precludes our sharing in those advantages by which other men benefit themselves without doubts or scruples. There is a period of discontent, disparagement, and

unrest before the striving emulative spirit, once stirred, can be again mortified.

But, sitting here at this tranquil hour, when all heaven and earth were blended in silent and solemn adoration of the Most Holy, nature asserted her old power over him, bidding him unclothe the dimness and inquietude of his own heart to the discipline of her sane and patient teaching.

That sunset was something more to him than a happy combination of lovely but transitory hues. It gave him a boundless hope, an endless promise and assurance. The thirst of the eye for outward beauty avails a man little unless there is beyond it the thirst of the soul for inward and spiritual beauty.

Wrayburn's desire had not been for a down-pillowed ease, a rose-leaved happiness, or even for a very notable degree of light and learning, but for something more than "a cold abstinence from evil deeds."

He had longed, with all the longing of a passionate nature, for a force that should work within him a "renovation without end ;" for a faith that should bear him manfully, with clear eye and fearless soul, through the madness and agitation of this world.

The very simplicity of his character arose from its consistency, the harmony formed by contrasts having their root in similarity.

That intense realization of a divine Presence ever near, which, in its highest degree, was possessed by the old Hebrew fathers, was in him mingled with the delicate, sensuous perceptions by which the old Greek heathen world traced a divine idea in every natural object. The one had given him a certain moral stability, the other a somewhat fantastic intellect. His very preference for the small humble virtues of obscure lives came from the facility with which that fantastic mind of his discovered value and meaning under the surface of things. As a man of

ideas he had retained a freshness and light-heartedness which the more world-worn man of action must perforce lose. Hence he was, when in his right mind, indifferent to those things that men strive and wrestle for, and contented with a condition of affairs that his brother regarded as deplorable, if not actually disgraceful.

As they sat silent and thoughtful, two little cottage children came along the shore and passed near them. The elder was gathering shells, which the younger was putting into his pinafore. Some fell whenever he extended it for a fresh supply. While he stooped to pick these up on one side, on the other side more escaped. A little shell-stream kept dropping about his feet, so that his task was as unending as Penelope's web.

For some time Wrayburn watched the children with an amused expression; then rose and went over to them. They looked up, startled, as the dark figure overshadowed

them, but his voice soon reassured them. Stooping down, he picked up all the shells, and, taking hold of the chubby hands, showed them how to secure the edges of the wispy little pinafore.

The children ran on hand-in-hand. His eyes idly followed the retreating little figures as he took out a cigar, slowly bit the end off, and put the case back in his pocket. They had not gone far, when the younger tripped and stumbled forward, casting up a perfect spray of shells as he fell upon the sand. The elder quickly raised him, gave him the regulation pokes and thumps ; then both ran on again in search of some new interest, heedless of the shells they had so laboriously gathered.

Wrayburn laughed, and returned to Mary.

“ There’s a type for you,” said he.

“ Of the unsatisfied heart ? ”

“ Yes, and of the endless patience it needs to teach us how to grasp the simplest truth.

At the first stumbling-block we lose our hold, cry out that we are hardly entreated, and then rush on to find out some truth that shall serve us better. Come, let us go home ; it's growing late."

Darkness was rushing up landward. The shades and mists of evening were settling down upon the bright fields like the shadow of early care upon a fair young face. All was dusky near the ground, but the tree-tops, the church tower, and the level face of some steep cliff here and there along the gloomy ironbound coast, were yet smitten by lingering gleams of pale lemon-coloured light. The evening air was full of autumnal odours, the fragrance of gorse and heath. Bats and winged insects were flying about. There was a sound among the rocks of little rills flowing out to the sea, mingled with the rising night wind. Repose and melancholy were in the twilight, as if nature was sad, but resigned and patient.

"I think this is the nicest Sunday we've had since we were married," Mary said, as they went slowly homeward, Wrayburn smoking his cigar in peace, agreeably to the understanding between them that tobacco should have no prohibition, since its scent was pleasing to his princess.

"Do you think so? I'm glad of that," he said, pressing affectionately the hand lying lightly within his arm.

And then he determined to say nothing about his brother's proposal to him, nor disturb her content in any way. All that talk with Ted should be "as a dream when one awaketh."

The visit to Sanclerc lasted a fortnight, and Mary greatly enjoyed it. Few women could resist Colonel Wrayburn. His manner to them had such a kind and gentle deference, and there was so much real goodness in him, that he was a very lovable sort of man, and made a delightful host.

Christina, too—though she could not exactly be described as a lovable woman—was well-bred and thoughtful. She had set herself to please Mary, and Christina seldom failed in what she had determined to accomplish.

The lovely autumn weather lasted down to the first week in November, and then suddenly broke. When they left Sanclerc they left under a leaden sky and in the midst of tempest. Fierce howling winds tore the leaves from the shuddering trees and snapped their branches, while deluges of rain swept in sheets across the dim landscape. Christina bade farewell to her guests within doors; but Colonel Wrayburn accompanied them to the station.

“When will you come again to us?” he said, as he and Mary stood within the shelter of the waiting-room while Lawrence went to the ticket-office.

“I cannot say,” she answered. “But I’m

carrying away such pleasant recollections of Sanclerc that I hope we shall see it again."

"And you must come earlier in the year, so that we may have more of your society. You see, we go away every autumn. We had just returned from Scotland before you came, and you might have stayed longer with us now if we were not due in Florence next week. The engagement was made some time ago, and Christina's father is such a very particular old gentleman. He would regard it as a slight, and be greatly offended if we failed to turn up at the appointed time."

"If this weather lasts, I think you will not feel sorry to get away to the South."

"No ; but it interferes a good deal with the hunting."

"Are you so fond of hunting ?" she asked, a little dryly, remembering what Wrayburn had once said about hunting being "a most confounded bore" to this man.

"I like a good run on a fine day, but I can't say I'm very enthusiastic about it. We're not such keen sportsmen as in some neighbourhoods. We only hunt once a week, and I find it quite enough. But you must go through with it the same as with other things, or you become unpopular. Here is your train. Where is Lawrence?"

"I'm here," he said, entering at the moment. "Cornwall is bidding adieu to us in fine native fashion. Good heavens! this place creaks and strains like a ship in a storm. Don't come out in the rain, Ted. What's the use of getting wet?"

But the fraternal Ted insisted on crossing the platform with them. Lawrence had not kissed *his* wife at parting, but he bent his tall head and kissed Lawrence's wife.

"Our new sister brought her own welcome with her," he said, holding her hand affectionately. "Good-bye, dear. Good-bye, Lawrence."

"Good-bye, old man. Write to me from Italy."

The two men shook hands less effusively but with more real good feeling than when they had met upon the same spot a fortnight before.

The porter banged the carriage door, the guard held up his hand, and the train, with only that minute's pause, rattled on its way again.

"You seem to have made a very tender impression on Teddy's susceptible heart," Wrayburn said in a quizzical tone, as he spread a rug across Mary and tucked it in around her feet.

"Oh yes; we are excellent friends. I am so fond of him, and he appears to be so fond of me, that peradventure had I met him first, and all the rest, you might still have married Christina," Mary replied, with good-humoured malice.

Wrayburn shrugged his shoulders in

silence. Pulling the fronts of his loose ulster closer about him, he laid a magazine across his knee and began to cut the leaves. But when she next glanced over at him, though his head was still bent over the book, his eyes were fixed upon her.

"Do you know what I was doing last night?" he said.

"Indeed I don't. It would take more time than a poor body has at her disposal to keep pace with your eccentric doings."

"I was making my will."

"Lawrence, how horrid you are!" Mary exclaimed, suddenly changing from gaiety to anger. "One never knows what you will say next. What has your brother got to do with your making a will?"

"Nothing, except that it was he who induced me to make it. Don't you see, if I died intestate you'd only get half of whatever I left; the rest would go to Ted. And, though I'm sure he wouldn't take it, he's

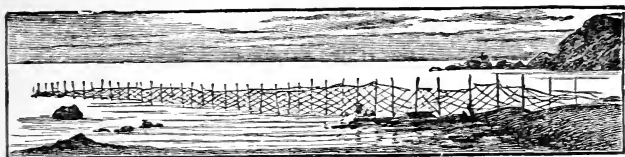
quite right in saying my wife should not be left to the generous treatment of another man. Swanneck I have left to you, with the option of selling it, or of keeping it if you're prepared to live in the province. The cottage in Westmoreland I've also left to your discretion."

She made no commentary on his doing, but began to wonder whether Colonel Wrayburn had some presentiment of danger or of evil attending the odd, unsettled life Lawrence had elected for himself. As she looked at him in the health and strength of his mature manhood, a superstitious fear entered her heart.

"I wish you would destroy that will, Lawrence," she said, after a long silence.

"Not I," he answered, handing to her the magazine he had been cutting; "now that it's written it shall stand."





CHAPTER VIII.

IT had been arranged that the bride and bridegroom should return after their honeymoon to Longbridge, and pass the winter months with Mr. Vanburgh. This had been suggested by Mary herself, and Mr. Vanburgh had caught at it so eagerly that Wrayburn had not the heart to raise objections. It was not an arrangement that altogether pleased him, however. For the longer Mary remained in her grandfather's house the more painfully the old man would feel her eventual withdrawal. Accordingly this visit was for a specified time. That

point once settled, he set himself to extract as much pleasure from it as possible.

Christmas and New Year came and passed, and the little house was very bright with unusual gaieties. Old mists from a dark sad time quickly roll away from contented minds. But where all were happy perhaps Wrayburn himself was the happiest.

Life was unfolding to him more than he had ever looked for. That such a woman as Mary should love him with all the force of a steadfast tender nature, and show that love in a thousand little silent ways daily, was an ever-new surprise and joy to him. Every day she gained a stronger hold upon his heart and filled it more entirely, so that he bade fair to become in time the most uxorious of husbands. He had found a candid womanly soul ; had called forth all its nascent sensibilities ; had attached its every fibre to himself ; had made it one with his own soul. Her soft submission to him

made his captivity to her the sweetest mutual liberty ; yet by nature Mary was not a submissive woman. Only long years of rigorous self-restraint had curbed her haughty spirit.

We love those best who make the most constant demand upon our best feelings, who have the power of calling into frequent play all our finest qualities. This power he had over Mary. Unconsciously he put her in the position for showing herself at her best, and she repaid him with no stinted affection. The heart which had lain solitary and dormant until his love awoke it to life and the fulness of life, found its whole world in him. The winter was over and gone. This was the joyous blossoming-time. This was that condition of ineffable content which we call "walking on clouds," an intoxication of serene felicity. All gloom and sadness and isolation belonged only to that sorrowful drama which had passed like

a frightful nightmare. The future—ah well! to the perfectly happy the future is a sort of glorified continuation of the present at its most satisfying moment; an overflowing compensation for all past suffering. They pitied the poor workaday world beneath their aërial world, that could not so much as enter into their heaven. This was one of the exaggerations with which we constantly mislead ourselves. Our misery is always of that acute kind which no ordinary mind can comprehend with sympathy. Our joy has in it such subtle delights as the outside world is incapable of realizing. The human heart is but one heart; human experience is confined within a very narrow compass; it is the sophistry of egotism which persuades us there is something unique in our dispensation.

About the middle of February, one afternoon when Mr. Vanburgh was gone to visit a sick friend, and Wrayburn also was out, Mary happened to be sitting alone.

She had been reading, but the book lay open on her lap, and she herself had fallen into a brown study.

From musing upon the happy present her mind had gradually worked back to the past, perhaps from the very contrast it presented. Since her marriage there had been little opportunity or inclination for thinking much about Loxdale. Possibly because she thought of him seldom she deluded herself with the fancy that she therefore thought of him more leniently. Often a fire that seems dying, if not already dead, can be fanned into a flame that shall presently blaze briskly. Mary's memory supplied this rekindling process. She let herself recall the scenes and incidents, the details and experiences of those hard days, until at length her whole heart burned with the old glow of bitter resentment.

"Merciful to him!" she said to herself scornfully; "when did he ever show any mercy to me?"

The blows and bruises he had sometimes given her fell freshly upon her as she indignantly remembered them. Virtue and violence had had a strange conflict between Loxdale and Mary, and for the most part poor virtue had been very much worsted. She could have forgiven much—anything in reason. But treachery and cruelty, hypocrisy and libertinism—how could she forgive these? How could she forgive the shame and wrong that had been brought upon her own womanhood; the degradation in which she had been involved by union with a life spent in mingled filth and frivolity? She might be pure in herself, but she had been made intimately acquainted with all forms of impurity. There lay the sharp sting; the root and essence of her burning resentment. As well might a man try to live in a sewer, hoping to remain healthy, as try to remain uncontaminated in the midst of vice. For that fruit of the tree of knowledge with

which Loxdale had so liberally supplied her, she felt, in the fierce repudiation of it, she could never forgive him, here or hereafter. It is only very proud, pure-minded women with strong womanly instincts who can feel thus bitterly. Women of less indubitable virtue are more forgiving.

Between five and six o'clock there is not much light remaining on a February evening. Recalled by the deepening gloom, Mary roused herself from her dreary train of thought. She rose, and was about to push back her chair. As she did so she faced the window, and looked straight into a pair of eyes that were intently watching her. The eyes belonged to a figure that obscured the window, and that vanished instantly their gaze met. Like a petrified woman, Mary stood for several moments in the same position, her hand and arm extended to take hold of the chair, but not reaching it. Suddenly she bounded to the window and

looked into the garden ; there was no one there. Going into the hall, she opened the house door, and went boldly right down to the gate, looking up and down the street. The lamplighter and milkman were going their rounds, and the postman was clearing the letter-box in the garden wall of a house opposite. But nowhere was any figure to be seen resembling *that* figure. Baffled, and filled with consternation, she returned to the house, and went again into the sitting-room.

“ It was a phantom of my own brain,” she said to herself ; “ I had been thinking so intently that at last I fancied I saw him. I’ve often heard of people’s imaginations playing them such tricks. This was a trick of mine. How could it be he when he is dead ? ”

But a cold dread froze the very blood in her veins, and sent a shudder through her from head to foot.

Standing as before, in the centre of the

room, she forced herself to try whether by an effort of the will she could conjure up that form again, that she might see whether it was the ghost of a dead man, or the living reality of a man who had only shammed being dead. But, stare as fixedly as she might, nothing came of it.

“It was a trick of my own fancy,” she repeated doggedly, and went into the bright cheerful kitchen, where Betty was moving about.

“Betty, did you ever see a ghost?” she asked, controlling her voice into a jesting tone.

“Why, no, my dear, I never did; that’s a funny question. What puts ghosts into your head?” the old woman said, as if slightly amused by such absurdity.

“The other room is so dark and eerie that I began to think how people sometimes imagine they see things.”

“Yes, indeed; it’s full time the lamps were

lit," said the practical Betty, preparing to light them.

Left alone again, Mary sat down on a low stool by the kitchen fire. Claspings her hands round her knees, she looked into the heart of the brilliant blaze with eyes that were yet horror-stricken. Could such a momentary vague glimpse of a phantom which instantly vanished be anything more than a hallucination? Could it be possible that *he* was not dead? or did the ghosts of bad men walk to torment others, being themselves tormented? She moved restlessly, with that uncomfortable sensation described as the hair upon the flesh standing up. It seemed to Mary that she must be going mad, for there was in her now the very strongest desire to shriek aloud, to cry out to any one and every one to come and protect her. Shivering, she looked into the fire with bated breath and beating heart.

Presently a latch-key grated in the lock,

and Wrayburn entered the house. The familiar sound of his voice speaking with Betty restored to her a partial self-command. Rising quietly, she slipped upstairs that she might bathe her face, and try to recover her usual appearance before meeting him.

But her room was all in darkness. In her agitation she could not find candles, tapers, or matches; and while she was yet fumbling about, Wrayburn's step was heard upon the stairs. Then Mary felt that unless she cried out she would die.

"Don't come here, Lawrence!" she exclaimed, with her hand hard pressed against her beating heart. "For pity's sake don't steal upon me in the dark, or I shall scream!"

Without heeding her, he came straight in. "What are you doing here?" he said; "and why don't you get a light?"

"I can't find the matches."

"They are where they always are," he answered, laying his hand upon the box.

When he had struck a light and lit the candles, he turned to her.

"What is the matter with you that you tell me not to steal upon you, as if I were trying to do it?"

"I beg your pardon, but I couldn't help it. That hateful man used to do it. If I happened to be in the dark, he would creep up and pinion my arms, or catch me round the throat. He pretended it was all fun; but I knew it was done to try and make me afraid of him. Yet I never was—one bit. And now my nerve is all gone; I'm a poor broken-spirited creature—afraid even of the darkness."

Wrayburn turned her to the light and looked at her attentively. "I know how it is you're so shaky and unstrung," he said. "You've been groping among the old bones of the past; pulling skeletons out of their graves, and raking up all the most unpleasant things you could think of. Isn't that it?"

“Perhaps—a little,” she said, smiling constrainedly.

“I mustn’t leave you moping by yourself again,” he said. But he did not tell her to put the skeletons back into their graves, or not to think of unpleasant things. Perhaps he knew how easy it is to give such advice, but how difficult to take it.

“I came up here to bathe my face,” Mary said; “I felt so sick and faint a little while ago, but it has all gone off now.”

“Try some eau de Cologne,” he said; and, taking a flask from the toilet-table, he poured some into the palm of his hand and wetted her hair and forehead with it.

“It has quite gone away,” she said. Suddenly putting her arms around his neck, she drew his head down and laid her cheek against his. It was only one of the affectionately impulsive little movements to which young wives are liable. But while she held him closely for a moment, a bitter, passionate

petition went up silently from the depths of her terrified heart—"O God, if that should be true—if that should be really *true*—our pain would be greater than we could bear. Spare us, good Lord!"

When they went downstairs, the curtains were drawn over that fatal window. Everything looked very warm and cosy, and this homelike security made poor Mary's mind feel more at rest. Mr. Vanburgh had come in, and was in very good spirits. The sick friend was much better. He was allowed to eat fish and game now; and, instead of brandy, he had been ordered three glasses of sherry daily. Mary compelled herself to show a cheerful interest in all these details, and the very exertions she made to appear as self-possessed as usual were productive not only of the appearance, but the reality. Outside, in the darkness of the foggy night, that phantom might be gliding; but she was here, in the warmth and shelter, on the right

side of the wall. It could not be that the time would ever come when she would be called to go out into the darkness too; to leave home and love behind, and follow that stealthy phantom wheresoever it led. She waxed strong in spirit, bold and defiant of phantoms. It had been a hallucination.

But from that day a change came over her. Every knock at the door made her start. To turn the corner of a street required an effort. Once turned, her eyes roved anxiously up and down, always searching for that loathed figure, always dreading to meet it.

A hideous doubt had been thrown into her mind, and refused to depart from it.

The fear that Loxdale might still be living made her long to know the actual truth. The fear that the actual truth would part her from Wrayburn made her cling to silence. Sometimes she almost determined to tell him what had happened on that

afternoon. But she was a woman well able to keep her own counsel until time had sufficiently matured events to necessitate speech. Moreover, she knew very well that Wrayburn would sift and scrutinize until the truth, whatever it might be, was dragged to light. Her own timidity she utterly condemned and despised, yet in truth she had plenty of courage had she not been in love. A woman can hardly be severely censured for showing a reluctance to examine too curiously the foundations of her happiness. In her moments of desperation she thought, let the happiness last as long as it would, and after that—the deluge! Holding to Wrayburn with the tenacity of her whole soul and strength, how could she voluntarily unlock the gates of her Eden, and go forth solitary into darkness and horror? The most strong-hearted, the most pure-minded, alike quail before the final acceptance of the inevitable; are only able, as they pass

through the period of tenebrous suspense preceding the last anguish, to cry, "If it be *possible*, let it pass." The thought that perhaps she had no right to her Eden left Mary no peace of mind. Her bliss was most cruelly marred. Day and night that hated figure dwelt with her, those demon eyes glared in upon her. Even now, *now* in the hour of her restful and honourable love, he had come to torture her. Alive or dead, he seemingly had still the power to rob her of all peace; and her hatred of him made the midday brightness black as midnight.

The heroic efforts she made to preserve her ordinary calm demeanour might easily have deceived a less observant man than Wrayburn. Her variable spirits, her forced interest, and fits of depression were not lost upon him; but he did not trouble himself about them. It appeared to him reasonable enough that a woman who had felt so deeply, suffered so much, and known

such vicissitudes, would be variable. It would be unnatural to expect from her the even balance of an ordinary smooth and placid life. So he was more gentle and considerate to her than ever, if that were possible ; and he put a hopeful construction on her pale fragile appearance and evident languor.

For more than a month after that day of the apparition, Mary appeared to pass the round of days in her customary way. But under this seeming security lurked all manner of misgivings. Her mind was overcast by the shadow of every possible evil that fancy or experience could present. They might be only chimeras, but they inflicted very real suffering. Before being laid upon the rack she underwent the torture, and died a hundred deaths in dying once.

It happened one morning that, as Betty was passing through the hall on her return

from market, she paused for a moment to glance in through the open door of the sitting-room. Mary was seated beside the fire with some fancywork in her hand. Mr. Vanburgh was pottering among his hyacinths at the garden window. Wrayburn was writing at a table in the other window. All were occupied and tranquil. The old woman sighed, and passed on into her kitchen. Putting her basket down upon the table, as though it were a heavy weight, she sank wearily into the nearest chair. While she languidly untied her bonnet-strings Mary entered.

“Are you ill, Betty? You look very pale,” she said, stopping short.

“No, no, my dear, I’m not ill,” Betty answered.

“Has anything gone wrong? Have you had a fright, or met with any accident?”

Mary’s voice was so unusually sharp, her glance so unusually keen, there was altogether

such a "fine edge" of intensity and expectancy upon her, that she quite disconcerted poor Betty.

"No, I've had no accident; but the day is so rough. The wind nearly took me off my feet coming round the corner. I got some soles and a couple of chickens for the dinner to-day; and will you have the veal from yesterday made into a mince or a curry?" she said, rousing herself with the old instinct of present duty, and beginning to unpack her basket.

"Whichever you think best," replied Mary. "We shall not be at home to dinner; so grandfather will dine alone. We are going over to Ellyn Vale."

"Well, if Mr. Wrayburn's going to drive you over in that high thing of Sinclair's, you should wrap up well; for it's cold, and very showery. And tie a veil round your hat, or it'll be blown away."

When Mary had gone, the old woman

joined her trembling hands and raised them for a moment above her head ; then let them drop apart and fall by her sides.

“ God forgive me if I’ve told her a lie,” she said to herself ; “ for if ever I got a fright, I did then. If he wasn’t dead, I’d a’ said it was him. And dear knows if he is dead. The fellow was fit for anything. I’d hardly believe he was dead unless I saw him with my own eyes laid in his coffin. The Lord preserve us from harm ! ”

With heavy sighs and many shakes of the head, expressive of intense incredulity, the old woman went about her daily work ; but she too was a woman steadfastly minded to keep her own counsel. For, alas ! those who have suffered greatly are well aware that much talking only aggravates an irremediable trouble.

The neighbourhood of Longbridge did not abound in choice “ bits.” The country around was undulating or rolling, dotted with

good comfortable farms and homesteads, village churches, and village schools. It was thoroughly English, well wooded, well watered, with an abundance of green and tender grass ; but it had the tame prettiness of good tillage and pasturage, of careful preservation visible on every hand, rather than the picturesque wild beauty of natural scenery.

Ellyn Vale was about twelve miles away ; a little village with an uninteresting "restored" Norman Church, and an interesting unrestored Norman ruin. A grand seigneur, who spent most of his time yachting about the world, gave his park occasionally for the use of Sunday-school *fêtes* and excursionists, and admitted visitors to his picture-gallery at all times, at the moderate charge of one shilling per head, which paid for the cup that he annually gave to be competed for by the local volunteers. Some Roman remains had been found in the vicinity, and the

excavations were being continued. Occasionally Wrayburn had walked over to have a look at what was going on. As he was fond of driving Mary about the country in a light dog-cart hired from a Longbridge livery-stable, he proposed to take her over and to dine at the little inn, which—frantically resolved to have something big about it in compensation for its small size—vauntingly styled itself the Royal Victoria Hotel.





CHAPTER IX.

THEY had returned in the evening, and were all gathered about the cheerful tea-table. Mr. Vanburgh, leaning back in his great armchair, with his slippers upon the fender, sipped his tea with a luxurious air of zest and enjoyment. Wrayburn had beside his plate an open book, from which he had been reading aloud some especially comic passages ; but he was now executing a caricature of the grand seigneur's housekeeper, who had condescended to show them through the picture-gallery. Tired of waiting for the end of a meal that concluded so tardily, Mary had moved

away to the piano, and was alternately playing short bits culled here and there, and turning over huge music-books.

"Will you have another cup of tea, Lorenzo mio marito?" she asked, looking round over her shoulder.

"No, thanks," he answered, still busy with his pencil.

"Grandfather, Lawrence has completely demoralized us," she said gaily. "When we were alone, you and I used to be the very pink of propriety. It's only when I remember our former decorum that I see the extent of our present decadence."

"I'm quite content to be demoralized, if it's no worse than this," Mr. Vanburgh returned, with a placid smile. "One can live very comfortably with a very moderate amount of decorum."

As he spoke, a long, resolute, but not very loud knock sounded at the front door.

"Who can that be, I wonder?" said

Mr. Vanburgh, carelessly. “‘Some late visitor, I answered; only that, and nothing more.’”

With strange distinctness, we remember very trifling details connected with those we greatly love or greatly dread. Mary's heart gave a great bound at the sound of that knock, and then felt as if it had ceased to beat. Some fatal inner voice whispered with unerring instinct that the hour had come. That sound was to her the crack of doom. She held her breath, listening to a slight altercation in the hall; but she never moved or turned round when the door opened and some one entered the room.

Wrayburn lifted his head and glanced indifferently at the stranger. Mr. Vanburgh's cup fell from his hand with a small crash and spill. He half rose, with a sharp cry, and then dropped back into his chair, his face livid, his eyeballs staring, his tremulous lips

apart, striving to speak, but unable to articulate.

Wrayburn sprang up in alarm. "Mary," he exclaimed, "don't you see the state he is in? He will have a fit;" and he went to Mr. Vanburgh's assistance. But Mary never stirred; never ceased to turn the pages of those great music-books, as if her very life depended upon such automatic turning.

The intruder sat down on a chair near the door, not from humility, but because it offered a commanding view of the room and of every one present. Squaring his angular shoulders, and resting his hands upon his knees, he looked around with an impenetrable expression.

"I seem to have disturbed a pleasant little family party," he observed; "I'm awfully sorry."

"Your visit certainly does not seem to be very welcome," said Wrayburn, stiffly. The

visitor's uncomfortable manner and appearance were displeasing, and he looked at him with a slight scowl.

"No, indeed," the other agreed blandly; "and," he added, "I should say it will be about as unwelcome to yourself as to any one."

"Where—where—where has——" stut-tered poor Mr. Vanburgh. But with the very violence of his effort to speak he fell back fainting.

Wrayburn brought some water, and threw a reproachful glance at Mary, still turning those weary leaves. The glance was followed by the resuscitated Loxdale, upon whom nothing was lost, and it appeared to afford him amusement, for he laughed softly.

The laugh was particularly irritating to Wrayburn. "Mary," he said sharply, "perhaps you'll be good enough to tear yourself away from that music, and ask this gentleman to state his business and then go as soon as

possible, for I don't think your grandfather can stand this sort of thing."

Mary rose mechanically, and came forward with a slow reluctant step, her eyes sedulously turned away from Loxdale. She had the stony calm of one who knows that all is lost; but her face was ghastly in its pallor, and she was trembling all over.

"What on earth ails *you*?" Wrayburn asked impatiently, feeling utterly perplexed by these sudden glooms and terrors and tremblings.

"Come, come!" said Loxdale, with a scandalized air; "fie fie! Is that the way we speak to our bride? Well, well! Only four months, or so, married, and use such an ungentlemanly tone. I'm shocked!"

A sudden suspicion entered Wrayburn's mind, as he took a rapid survey of this man, and then looked at the shuddering figures of the other two.

"Who are you?" he said abruptly;

“where do you come from? and what do you want?”

“Ah!” said Loxdale, “very sensible questions. I admire your directness, Mr.—Mr. Wrayburn, isn’t it? Who am I? That lady will tell you I’m an old friend—a *very* old friend. Isn’t there something about one friend sticking closer than another, or a brother? That’s the blooming sort of friendship there is between us; we stick like prawns. Where do I come from? Well, I’m supposed to have come up from Gehenna, where my friends and well-wishers believed I was enjoying a ‘personally conducted.’ As to what I want; I’ve found that in this world I’ve mostly had to limit what I want to what I could get.”

“No doubt your pleasant humour is exceedingly agreeable to yourself, but it’s hardly so to other people,” said Wrayburn, coldly. “Perhaps you’ll be a little more explicit.”

“Oh, willingly!” said Loxdale, politely. “My name is Loxdale. I come from America, where it has been supposed I was lying quietly in my grave for the last ten or twelve months; and my friends are so overjoyed at my restoration that you see they can’t find words to express their delight. ’Pon my soul, it’s quite affecting!”

Wrayburn turned quickly to Mary. “Is this the man you were formerly married to?” he said, in a voice that did not sound like his own.

“That is the man I am married to,” she answered distinctly.

An utterly blank look came over his face. “This is horrible!” he exclaimed; and walked to the other end of the room, sitting down in the very spot he always called “cosy corner.”

It was a corner fitted with an old-fashioned, square-backed settee, covered, like the rest of the furniture, in faded yellow.

A work-table on one side, and a large lacquered screen on the other, gave to it an air of seclusion. On the wall behind hung a number of ivory miniatures and little pictures, in tarnished gilt frames, of deceased members of the Vanburgh family. These, with the few bits of rare china above them, were the things Mr. Vanburgh valued, next to Mary herself, more than anything in the world. It was a very precious little corner, shaded by tender memories, and full of gentle associations. Here Wrayburn had sat with Mary many a time, and oft, like two love-birds, edging ever closer together, their hands softly clasped, their lips whispering tender nothings. Here he had lolled beside her, reading to her while she worked, anathematizing the faded fern-leaves and pressed flowers which ever and anon kept slipping from between the pages of his books; then carefully replacing them as she reminded him of some happy day of which they were

the souvenirs. Here, in the idleness of "sweet do-nothing," he had often maliciously unpinned her hair, letting it all fall down about her that he might admire its bright abundance, and had been laughingly scolded for his pains. Here he had obediently held her silks and wools while she wound them; had caught and kissed her pretty hands, and had his ears boxed lightly for such over-daring, while he helped to disentangle the parti-coloured silken mass.

He had not thought about it until he sat down, when all the delightful charm of that exquisite love-making was revived with bitterest sweetness. How was he to live without it? He leaned back pale and expressionless, nervously gnawing the ends of his moustache and looking into vacancy. This Loxdale camisade had completely overwhelmed him. For a time it might almost be said he was unconscious of what passed around him.

"I hope you are satisfied at last," Mary was saying, addressing Loxdale.

Mr. Vanburgh caught her hand and gripped it tightly. "Don't, Mary—don't rouse him up and make things worse," he entreated, as if Loxdale were some savage beast which she proposed to tease.

"Worse!" she echoed, with bitter emphasis; "what worse could they be? The very worst is come. Oh, even *you* should be satisfied at last."

"Perhaps I am," Loxdale answered airily, looking all the time at Wrayburn. "I've got my revenge, and, all things considered, it's a pretty ample one. Here you are, married to the man you were in love with, comfortably settled down to have a good time of it on the supposition that I'm finally disposed of. And here I am now, turned up again like a bad sixpence. It's a nicely contrived little dilemma for you—ain't it? There'll be some intricate little questions to settle."

"There are no intricate questions. It is quite simple," Mary said, with proud austerity. "Since you are yet alive, I'm not Mr. Wrayburn's wife."

"And how will he take that, do you think?" he asked, with a sneer.

"He will take it," she said, her voice faltering for a moment, "as he has taken other hard things."

"And you—you came to me in 'Frisco, asking to make friends, to return to me, that you might forget your lover. Are you so willing now to discard him, and come back to me before all the world?"

Mary was silent, and he went on—

"When you came that day, I confess you took me by surprise. I was not prepared for you, and, on the spur of the moment, I couldn't think things out to my satisfaction, so I dismissed you civilly. But did you think you were done with me?"

"I thought nothing of the kind," she

answered. "I knew perfectly well the moment I was gone you would begin to hatch some plot against me."

Loxdale leaned back at ease in his chair, with one arm dangling over its back. His white teeth gleamed under his moustache in a slow sleepy smile, and he winked one eye at Mary.

"We know each other pretty well, don't we, madame? You served a long-enough apprenticeship to understand and perfect yourself in my little ways. Nothing like a good plot—eh? Why, since I came out of quod the best part of my money—in fact, my only money often—has been made by helping the police. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' you know. There are some queer fish in the world, and you'll not draw much out of those waters unless you bait your hook with a still queerer fish. Ah! it's very amusing sometimes—more exciting than Doncaster by half;" and, doubling up his hands, he fell

to admiring his nails with a thoughtful smile, as if stirred by some entertaining recollections.

Fanny Gray had said Loxdale was not a vulgar man ; that he loved elegance, though he was not particular how he got it. At the time she knew him such a description would have been accurate enough ; but she had made no allowance for the mental and moral deterioration which had gone on in the man since then. Every year he had gone a steep step lower on the downward path ; and well he knew it. He still had the semi-languid air and army accent of his palmier days. But he had insensibly imbibed the manners as well as the morals of his debased associates ; and the *diablerie* in the man found a reckless pleasure in shocking the sensibilities of more punctilious people.



CHAPTER X.

“**W**ELL, Mary, all’s fair, you know, in love and war,” Loxdale continued, “and I thought I’d like to be quits with you. It wasn’t nice of you to go falling in love with other men, even if I was a bad lot. Still, I might have overlooked that, ‘by arrangement’, as they say, if I could only have got hold of this gentleman. I called three times at his hotel. Twice he was out, and the third time he was gone, and that rather grieved me. Then, quite casually, I met Pierce, and it came into my mind that I might utilize him. He had only just arrived, and no one knew him. He was

down on his luck, and ready for anything. When I suggested that we should go to Sacramento, and try our luck there with billiards, he caught at it as if it was the gospel of glad tidings. I saw that he'd serve my turn admirably. He'd been drinking hard—drinking the very boots off his feet. With a little more priming he'd die beautifully in a few days, in the most natural manner. I happened to be rather flush just then—that is, for me—so I helped him out with his kit. He was uncommonly like me; that's how the idea came into my head. Any description that would fit him would fit me quite as well. It really looked like a special providence, so accommodating as it was of him to come across me just then, when I hadn't seen him for years. He became Loxdale, I became Pierce; and the beggar never knew it, he was that fuddled. To give a further realistic touch to his Loxdale, I dyed my own hair and moustache

—a thing I always disliked—and wore an eyeglass. Little things alter a man amazingly. It wouldn't do for other people to see the resemblance between us. That might leave room for sickly doubts and suspicions when the matter came to be inquired into, especially when some folks are of an unbelieving turn, and happen to have been done a few times already."

His cold, hard, restless eyes hovered continually between Mary's face and Wrayburn's; but at the last words he rested them full upon her, glittering with mockery.

"D'ye care to hear any more?" he asked, in a soft insinuating voice, and bending forward.

She silently turned away her head with a movement of scorn and loathing. Loxdale laughed, his dry, mirthless, affected laugh.

"Those are the very airs and graces, madame, that I've had it in my mind to cure this many a day," he said, with covert

savagery, and glancing at Wrayburn as if pleased to show that she belonged to himself, and must submit to his *manége*.

“Have you anything more to say?” asked Mary. “We are waiting to hear it.”

“Well, yes,” he rejoined, “I’ve a good deal more to say.—I’ve often thought,” he added, with a quiet chuckle, “that some of the incidents in my career would make a very decent melodrama if they were only put together acceptably. But among my many talents that special talent is wanting. I’m not a playwright. Well, Pierce continued his considerate conduct. He really behaved in most friendly fashion, for he dropped off after only a few days, so he was no unnecessary expense to me. I’m not mean naturally; but Jordan is such a cursed hard road to travel that, by Jove! it makes a fellow take illiberal views, whether he will or not, and I’d no fancy for keeping our friend for an indefinite period. But he

relieved me even of that anxiety. And he was worth more dead than alive, for he didn't cut up so badly. His friends at home here were respectable, and they'd be so deucedly glad to hear he was done with that I knew I'd be in a fair way of getting salvation if I could only be the bearer of the tidings. And I wasn't disappointed. Stiff, high-toned lot, mother and sisters. When I told her Jack was gone, and gave her his watch—which I'd been at the expense and trouble of fetching down the spout—and a few other odds and ends, 'The Lord have mercy on his unfortunate soul!' says she, throwing up her eyes and her hands. But I could see his soul was quite a secondary consideration compared with the relief of being rid of his unmannerly *corpus*. However, that wasn't my business. I talked to the old girl in a way that showed her very plainly that if her son chose to die and be buried in a foreign land, she'd have to stand the racket, for I wasn't

going to. There must be an uncommonly rich vein of generosity in that family. She panned out quite a payable quantity at the start and under my persuasive ten-stamp battery, really I was astonished myself, and that's saying a good deal, for this child's not easily astonished. To your good health, Mrs. P. May you live for a thousand years, and your shadow never grow less."

He showed such a lively interest and keen enjoyment in his own exploits that, under any other circumstances, it might have furnished enough amusement to hide superficially his ingenious depravity. He was vain yet—vain of his fiendish manœuvring, since he could not well be vain of anything else. But there were none present who could be thus amused. To their narrow-minded vision he was an assassin and brigand. All his *bizarre* ways did not hide the brutalized corruption which lay naked and appalling as he stripped it to their view.

“This is Mary’s husband!” Wrayburn thought, and shuddered. “This is what he sees I am married to!” Mary thought, with shame and despair.

“No, I’ve not found being a sinner was at all remunerative,” Loxdale continued, tilting his chair on its back legs and swaying gently to and fro, with his hands in his pockets, as he gazed contemplatively at the ceiling. “If I have followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart, it seems to have kept me at dead low water. If there was any church on earth known to me that would give you something handsome down in hand, instead of some doubtful drafts to be honoured ‘in the sweet by-and-by,’ I’d have been religious long ago, blow me if I wouldn’t! But if anything could reconcile me to the state of sin, it would be such touching behaviour as that old lady’s. No brother in Christ I have yet met with ever attempted to set me so

effectually on my legs as she has done, from the sheer joy and satisfaction of knowing her son was gone to the devil this time and no mistake. I'm much better dressed, you see, than when we last met; and that's only one evidence among many of the benefit I have derived from being able to prove to Mrs. Pierce that Jack was really gone to perdition at last."

"If you have anything else to say that concerns me, or any one else here, pray say it, and then go. But we don't wish to listen to your monologues," said Mary, fearlessly.

The only notice he took of her remark was to glance contemptuously at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"It's not an uncommon feeling. In fact, I believe it's diffused over a wide class," he said, with a movement of his hands as if spreading something. "Very excellent people sometimes experience a certain balmy content when they hear an objectionable

relative has got the route for Tartarus, and are inclined to cut up rough, and call it the irony of fate, when they find the balmy content was all a fraud, and the objectionable one, instead of frizzling quietly before the satanic fires, turns up as fresh as a daisy. No allusion to any one here, of course. But there *are* such unfeeling natures in the world, you know, that, positively, they are capable of grudging a fellow even his existence."

No one spoke when he ceased. Wrayburn, who had sat throughout with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, staring at one figured square in the carpet, never moved; nor did Mary, who stood beside Mr. Vanburgh, holding his hand. The poor old man had had a terrible shock. His face looked quite altered, and he trembled and moaned from time to time like one bearing the most acute pain.

"I say, old man," said Loxdale, irritably, "can't you abate that groaning a bit? It's

awfully wearing to listen to. Reminds me of people when they're sea-sick, and make you long to pitch 'em over. Well, Mary, my dear, I was down here about a month ago; came by one train and went back by the next. I'd kept myself pretty well informed as to your movements, but I thought I'd just have a look round for myself. It was no use coming any sooner, for you were away from home—honeymoon, of course, and all that—and I never was a kill-joy. I came here at dusk, as I once did on a former memorable occasion. You were sitting before the fire here alone; and I stood in the shelter of the window-curtain, looking in at you for five or ten minutes. When you moved at last you stood up so suddenly that I thought you'd seen me. I had only time to slip down to those blessed old lilac-bushes when you came out. You looked up and down, and all around, but saw nothing, though I was within a few

yards of you, and could almost have touched your dress. It's well to know the topography of a place, you see. You'd got a bit of a fright, and that was all. There was no harm done, and as soon as you'd gone in I came out from behind those blamed bushes, vastly amused, and with such a lot of cobwebs across my face as I never met before or since. I kept wiping my face all the way back to London, but the cursed stuff was of the real old genuine 'I'll stand by you till the morning' breed, for I verily believe there was some of it there when I got up next day ;" and he leaned back and laughed at the recollection. "Then I let a little more time elapse, you see, before paying my second and present visit. I believe in taking your time, and paying out plenty of rope. I never had any patience with fellows who spoiled sport by getting flurried and making a rush ; besides, it's not artistic. I knew the spill would be much more thorough and

worth looking at, if I waited until you'd got considerable way on you before spoking your wheel."

"You have succeeded admirably," Mary replied, with scornful frigidity. "You may congratulate yourself on being a finished artist in iniquity."

Loxdale was silent for a few moments, looking steadily at the group before him.

"Yes," he said at length, "if I were not already about as thoroughly well damned as I suppose a man can be, I should deserve to be damned for this work, if for nothing else."

He spoke with his usual flippancy, but in the careless words there was a fragment of long-forgotten and disused magnanimity. It was the one sole suggestion of any possibly redeeming feature in him.

"Lawrence!" Mary exclaimed, with sudden sharpness, going over to him and laying one hand on his shoulder, "have you not a word to say?"

“What can I say?” he asked, looking up with half-piteous, half-savage eyes. “When I awoke this morning you were my wife. To-night I have no wife. Such violent changes are too sudden and theatrical for me; I can’t understand them.”

“Oh, the situation is not materially altered,” said Loxdale, rising and beginning to button up his coat. “You are my wife, Mary, instead of Mr. Wrayburn’s—that’s all. You are still a married lady, and, according to the views of many ladies, that is in itself such ‘a consummation devoutly to be wished’ that they could overlook a good lot of unpleasantness. And, seeing you and I cut the loaf long ago, marriage is about as little inconvenience to us as to most people. What do you say, Mr. Wrayburn, shall we agree to differ, and let things go on as they are at present? They seem very satisfactory. I’m quite agreeable, if you can see your way to making it worth my while to leave my wife in your charge.”

"Go to the devil!" said Wrayburn, sullenly.

"Which I'm doing as fast as I can most conscientiously," replied Loxdale, jauntily. "Then these be the last words of Loxdale, for I'd best be making tracks. Adieu, madame; *au revoir*. It's war, you know—war to the knife. Good night all! Pleasant dreams!" And with a bow and a smile, and a suave wave of the hand, he left the room, and a moment later had left the house.

When he was gone, the oppressive silence of the other three remained unbroken. The confessions of that Chappelet had not been Chappelet-like. They had been brazen in the effrontery of undisguised cruelty and malevolence. He had premeditated their disruption, and gloried in it; and they were still under the spell of that mocking voice and baleful presence.

Poor Mary felt like one around whose helpless limbs the cold slimy folds of some

huge octopus were winding and tightening. Writhing under the agonizing grip of the blood-sucking monster, she was yet powerless to release herself.

Wrayburn rose, and began to pace slowly up and down the room. What his thoughts were Heaven only knows.

In most men there are greater possibilities of good than they are themselves conscious of. Possibly the unconsciousness arises from a vicious system of training and social intercourse, which requires us to venerate in theory standards which it encourages us to modify in practice. Those older and more elemental principles, which are universally acknowledged as the basis of all virtuous conduct, can have a very partial influence over the man who has learned to content himself with their feeble approximation. By such deep-reaching inner falsehood, the springs of his whole nature lose half their force and spontaneity.

If in some there are unknown possibilities of good, there is in all men a greater force of evil than ever appears upon the surface, and which can only be guessed at by side lights. By the resilience of this force we sometimes see one who has vigorously endeavoured to slough off "the old man," who has diligently practised the habit of virtue, undo by one deliberate act the work of a lifetime. His whole previous record is then open to suspicion; and, though the suspicion may not be vindicable, seldom indeed is it that he is acquitted of hypocrisy. Yet, severely as the world censures such a one, it never grasps the truth that men are quite as much punished by their follies as by their sins; that an error in judgment, over-much patience, or over-much passion, a misplaced confidence, or defect of faith, led up step by step to the overmastering temptation by which he fell.

If Wrayburn made a false step, there could

be no doubt he would do it with his eyes wide open. If he fell he would fall deliberately of malice prepense and irretrievably. The man who accidentally falls from a lower window, from want of caution, can generally be made as sound a man as ever. Not so the man who coolly climbs to the roof and casts himself down thence. He intends and accomplishes a fatality. The fatality of moral suicide was looming before Wrayburn.

Suddenly he left the room, closing the door after him. Instantly Mary followed him.

“Oh, where are you going?” she exclaimed, mistrust and alarm mingled in the agitation of her voice.

“I must go somewhere ; I can’t stay here. This is no place for me any longer,” he answered, looking round, for his hand was on the latch of the hall door, and he had his hat on.

“Oh, you must not go ! You surely cannot

have the heart to leave us like this!" she cried. "You shall not go!" and, placing herself between him and the door, she laid one hand against him to detain him, and one against the panels to prevent him from opening the door.

His face was very pale and set; his eyes were smoky-looking and unpleasant.

"All right," he said defiantly; "if I stay now I shall stay for good; and you shall not get rid of me again, even if you want to. I'm quite willing. Only say the word, and I'll stay."

"Oh, you are cruel!" she groaned, looking at him with reproach, and all the yearning of a last entreaty.

"No, I am not," he said. "But you know as well as I do that we're between the devil and the deep sea. You must choose one or other; yet you won't, though you keep telling me to stay. What am I to stay for?"

He waited a moment, but she made no answer; and putting her aside with a swift movement, he pulled the door open and went out into the night.





CHAPTER XI.

IT was Saturday night ; and though the hour was late, the streets were still full of foot-passengers when Wrayburn entered the main thoroughfare of Longbridge. The pedestrians were nearly all of the humbler classes, either hurrying to do their late marketing, or slowly returning laden with their purchases. To avoid the throng he kept in the middle of the road, passing right across the town, and walking like one in a hurry, though he had no definite object, and knew not whither he went. The suburbs on the further side of Longbridge were quickly reached and passed. When he had

crossed the railway bridge the open country lay before him, and he kept straight on.

The day had been unsettled, the night was wild and wet ; not with a continuous downpour, but with sudden sweeping torrents of hail and rain, alternating with fitful gleams of moonlight struggling through the ragged sulphur-coloured edges of great flying clouds.

The imprisoned wind at times hushed itself into low mutterings ; then, rising gradually, and whistling as it rose, raved and raged and wrestled with the driving rain, ere it sank again to that low dreary moaning.

When the hail pelted Wrayburn, he bent his head stolidly to meet its lashing. When the moonlight shone out, he walked erect again ; but maintained through both the same hard pace.

His brain was asleep. He was not thinking or revolving anything. A vague sense of unrealized calamity mingled with the wild

voices of the night. Trouble, storm, and darkness surrounded him, smote him, eluded him. There was a loud singing in the ears, a confusion of the faculties, a throbbing in every nerve like those accompanying the struggles of an overwrought swimmer. The rapid movement and rhythmic sound of his own step alone eased this unbearable irritation.

As he went on the muddy roads grew worse. He was still upon the high-road, but pavements and gaslamps lay far behind. It was an open country road, with high hedges on either hand dividing it from the fields beyond, and here and there a gaunt tree looming out of the darkness like a gibbet.

All along the horizon lay a dense bank of black cloud like some great mountain range. Lightning flashed occasionally from behind the peaks of these cloud-mountains, followed by low rolls of distant thunder reverberating

from some faraway storm-centre. Before him the path was like the mouth of a huge cavern, into which he plunged as he tramped on, splashing the mud from right to left. It takes a long road to tire a man accustomed to an open-air life and plenty of exercise; but no man can keep on mile after mile at racing pace without experiencing fatigue.

As Wrayburn imperceptibly slackened his speed, his brain awoke from its torpor. Pain unspeakable; a sense of loss and wrong intolerable; fierce anger, and the burning thirst for vengeance;—these beset him like furies and drove him madly forward again. Oh that he were back in Swanneck, that he had never left it, that he had never seen the face of man or given his heart to woman! Oh that he were back again in the sunny innocence of childhood, before these storms had burst upon him and withered him with their fury! Of what avail was it that he had cleansed his hands and turned away his

eyes from beholding vanity? that he had stultified his own ambition, and passed along the world's highway as a traveller to another country? that he had not stopped to listen to the voice of the charmer, charm he never so wisely? He had asked nothing for himself, kept back nothing for himself; been willing to give up all that he knew he might have either won for himself or found ready for him—wealth, fame, honour, distinction, luxurious living, beautiful surroundings, the praise of men, the flattery of women. He had but stooped to gather one lonely way-side flower for the sake of its sweetness, and even its possession was disputed with him. A fiend had snatched it from him and proved that it was his.

Amid all this darkness there was only one ray of light, and that of the most hideous description. The veil was lifted from his marriage, and the pitiless ray fell there. That happy, joyous, improvident marriage,

the triumphant counterpoise to so much preceding pain, was no marriage. She had never been his. Even while she seemed to belong to him and was still beside him, she had belonged to that fiend. Those four peaceful months of golden happiness were all a dream and a delusion. He had dreamed that he possessed a priceless bliss ; he awoke, and a worm was gnawing at his heart. Unwittingly, he had walked right into the snare laid for him with such devilish ingenuity. He was caught and held fast. He must see her delivered over to the tormentors before his very eyes, and yet be unable to move hand or foot to release her. This morning she had been his to hold against the world ; to-night he must offer her no protection, although she was left solitary and defenceless in the hands of his enemy. He felt like a coward thus to desert a woman in her sorest need, yet knew not how to help her, or what form of help remained to him. The thought

of his own helplessness drove him wild. He smote his clenched hands together, and burst into fierce imprecations—those blood-curdling curses which sound so much worse when muttered low with the intensity of downright fury, than when flung abroad with noisy bellicose indifference.

The level roads irritated him beyond endurance. If only he were once more among the mountains ! that he might climb, and strain, and wrench himself, and spend this consuming fever of energy in striving with obstacles that would oppose every endeavour to overcome their eternal strength and immobility !

He grew fretful with the slippery mire and gentle undulations of the ground. During some blinding squall he had got out of the high-road, and was lost amid a labyrinth of swampy by-paths. There was no ending to them ; and still he tramped on in the deep ruts between the narrow hedges. If homi-

cide is the result of a sudden impulse arising from some definite cause, but upon no authorized grounds, there can be no doubt that if any man had met Wrayburn and barred his way just then, he would have sprang upon that man and killed him in the mad intolerance of such opposition.

The gleams of moonlight were fewer and farther between. That impenetrable mass of black cloud was gradually covering the sky, and wholly shutting out the stars. The night was less tempestuous, and settling into heavy rain.

There is nothing more dispiriting than to be thoroughly wet and tired, and worn with inward conflict.

And only this morning he had been delighting his heart by dreaming dreams, and seeing all manner of joy and hope-inspiring visions.

But now all those clear visions were gone, and in their stead reigned chaos, tumult, and

thick darkness. The joys of home were not for him. Away with the vanity which had dreamed of drawing around him a cluster of happy souls and cheerful lives! Happy! cheerful! He laughed aloud at the mockery of such words. All the sweet ties of love would henceforth be changed into so many powers of torture to poison every best feeling and aspiration within him. Love is so essentially the mysterious gift of Heaven, that the lover's pride in himself is justified by this sign of distinction. Should the gift be withdrawn, his anguished remonstrance or silent despair is equally justified; for he feels he has lost favour with the Immortals. But in Wrayburn, beyond his wild grief for his living wife cruelly wrenched from him by such foul treachery, there was the struggle of traitorous Iscariot's soul before he betrayed his Master.

When, in mute reproach and appeal, he lifted his pale and hardened face to the dark

sky, the cold rain fell upon it as if in mocking response.

To get away from these lanes, with their maddening monotony of mud and pools, he vaulted over a gate before him, and entered the fields. They were like a morass ; but he held on in the darkness, taking the stiles and gates as he came across them, as he would have taken anything else in his way.

Once he stood still, and the resolve came upon him that he would turn back. It was not because he was tired, or that he wanted to get out of the driving rain. As he stood he did not feel it beating down upon him in torrents. That was not what he was thinking of. Instead of accepting the knife and cautery, he would heal his gaping wounds in a more natural way. He would return to Mary and remain with her. He would defy the whole moral and social code ; deny the spirit of his whole life ; throw down a challenge to the unseen powers. Let them

do their worst to the apostate ! He would grapple with that fiend and smash him, so that he should never rise again. He would put the sceptre back into Mary's hand, and let her rule again—by might if not by right. Had she not asked him to stay ? Why not take her at her word ? Well he knew that not in the sense he meant had Mary entreated him to stay ; that she would not consent to a life of sin. But he would *make* her. What other protection had she ? He would answer for the responsibility of both. She should not go from him. He *would* have his happiness, let come what might ; who was to prevent him ? Why should he tamely submit to be overthrown and make no effort to hold his own ? How could he eat away his heart in silence when he might take what he wanted, and never look back or repent ? Confused and furious, he plunged about the field, but could find no way out. Even if an opening could be

found, there was then that maze of fields and lanes behind. He knew not where he was, and could only go forward.

“There must be an end somewhere,” he muttered to himself; “there’s nothing for it but to go on to the end.”

On he went, stumbling over the treacherous ground, fighting every inch of the way with the aroused tiger within him that lies dormant in every man. There were no more fields after the last stile; he found himself in a narrow sandy lane like a deep cutting between high banks of sandstone rock on either hand, with gorse growing at the top. He went more slowly now, for the ground was heavy and he was exhausted, having come some five and twenty miles at a killing pace, and in a state of mind akin to madness.

This cutting was as interminable as the lanes. Turning off impatiently at the side, he swung himself up the steep bank. By

the wind that met him at the top, and the springy feel of the soil beneath his tread, he knew that he was on some kind of open heath. The darkness was Egyptian ; it was impossible to see his hand before his face ; but the wind had gone down, and for a time the rain had ceased. In the darkness he could distinctly hear the melancholy sighing of pine trees near at hand ; and again he stood still for a moment, to listen to the familiar sound.

Slower and slower he went now, ready to drop with fatigue penetrating to the very bones.

Gradually the heavy clouds broke and slowly lifted. In the opening the setting moon shone low in a narrow strip of clear dark sky. Suddenly Wrayburn threw out his arms, and sprang backward with a sharp cry of fear and amazement. For he was on the very edge of an immense sandstone quarry. One step more and, but for the

shining of the friendly moon, he would have been dashed to pieces on that stone floor far down below. The moment he realized his danger, and had avoided it, naturally the impulse came upon him to throw himself over. The feeling passed quickly, and he stood upon the verge looking down into the quarry.

In that weird dim light it looked like the ruins of some vast gloomy temple. The yellow glittering stone had been so evenly quarried that in places the precipitous sides rose smooth as lofty walls. On the farther side were the murmuring pines he had heard. Huge blocks of rough-hewn stone, lying about below, resembled the broken fragments of great fallen columns ; while in other parts the terraces, galleries, and cornices aided the architectural effect. The rails of a tramway, and the wide pools of water beside them, gleamed cold in the moonlight. In the deep shadow vaguely seen outlines of loaded and

empty trucks gave an impression of great mounds of *débris*. It was a strange place for the solitary, homeless man to find himself at in the silent small hours. This, then, was the end of his journey; he could go no further.

In a few minutes the moon had set, the clouds closed up, all was darkness again.

"My God!" he exclaimed; and, letting himself drop in a heap on the soaked earth, he laid his face on his arms, and broke into passionate tears.

He could not pray; but all the elements of prayer—humiliation, entreaty, penitence, and surrender—were in that single ejaculation. Had this man really believed the moon shone out at that particular moment that he might be saved from an untoward event, it would have been the very impertinence of egoism. But he did not so believe. He only *felt* that all through that desolate night of wandering, of storm and darkness

within and without, he was "had in remembrance."

He had gone astray ; the strife in his heart was an unrighteous strife ; the laws he was determined to follow were unrighteous laws. But the shining of the moon upon his perilous steps had been to his soul as a hand unveiled to restrain him, to guide his errant heart back to its allegiance. He would give up ; he would let all go from him, and seek for no revenge ; he would bear his wrong as best he could, and walk in the light.

Even then, as he lay crushed and broken, his soul torn and tossed by the surge of tempest, he seemed to himself to be only a type of all humanity. Behind its blind gropings and strugglings, its tumultuous hurry and darkness, and poor ineffectual self-will, the light was shining ; ready to be revealed to the eye that would see, to the heart that would yield and follow its guidance.

Not for himself did he pray ; but, out of the depths of his penitent soul, his tears were unconsciously a prayer for "Mercy upon all men."

Dawn does not break very early in March, and on Sunday mornings folks sleep or stay a-bed for an extra half-hour. When at length Wrayburn found a village, guided to it by the persistent crowing of cocks, he had still to walk about for a long time before he could present himself at the little roadside inn. The landlady stared at him with no very friendly air ; and well might she ! His clothes were soaked with rain and splashed all over with mud. No ploughman would have owned such boots. The haggard look of a man unwashed, unshaved, unkempt, was added to the traces of the disorder and agitation in which he had spent the night.

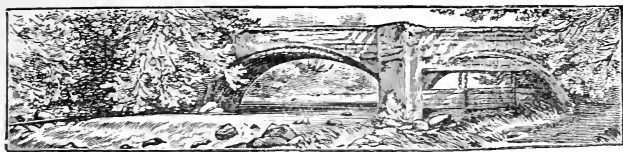
When he put down a sovereign, the woman was more inclined to admit that perhaps he could be accommodated with a bedroom.

"You've walked a long way, maybe," she said, surveying him with wonder and curiosity.

In no mood for answering questions, he told her briefly he had lost his way and been out all night. The woman led the way up to a clean little countrified bedroom, and bade him put his clothes and boots outside the door, that they might be dried and brushed.

Good health, an easy mind, and a good conscience are said to be the three requisites for sound sleep. The first is generally sufficient. It was in Wrayburn's case. He had hardly laid his aching head down before he was asleep—dreaming that he was walking with Ted under the shade of leafy trees in some sunny pleasant country.





CHAPTER XII.

THE bells of every church and chapel in the town were chiming, ringing, and tinkling for evening service when Wrayburn re-entered the house he had quitted so abruptly overnight, and which henceforth would know him no more.

His appearance had undergone a great improvement since the morning. As King David arose, and washed and anointed himself, and sat down to meat when he heard his child was beyond avail of prayers and tears, so Wrayburn, when he had borne the full crash of anarchy, had washed and shaved and brushed himself—had eaten

and drank, and slept well. He bore no resemblance now to the mud-stained and disreputable-looking character at whom the landlady had gazed in wonder. He looked pale and tired, and his face had that thinned and sharpened appearance which quickly follows even a few hours of intense suffering ; but he was calm now, and self-controlled.

Mary, on the other hand, presented a most draggled, woebegone spectacle. All through that terrible night, and all through the long dreary day, Mr. Vanburgh had lain in a state of prostration between sleep and stupor, and she had kept her vigil beside him. She had wept until she could weep no more ; but she had not broken her fast, or slept, or even lain down, and her ashen pallor told of awful inner exhaustion. All her fresh neatness was gone. Her eyes were red and swollen with tears, her dress was tossed, her collar crumpled, her hair roughly pushed back from the face and

wisped up in a knot behind, with utter indifference to appearance.

When she entered, Wrayburn was resting his arms upon the edge of the mantelpiece, with his head bent down upon them. As she approached, he raised himself, and, laying a hand on her shoulder, studied her closely by the brilliant firelight.

He asked himself how he was to regard her—this woman who yesterday had been his wife, bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, the beloved of his soul, but who to-day was nothing to him.

The unconscious grace and dignity of her attitude, the pathetic patience of her face, as she bore his keen scrutiny, answered the question for him. She was not his wife; but they were still united by an unalterable affection, and the interpenetration of sympathy in so profound a grief. She was not his wife; but she was still a woman, his fairest, best-loved, and chosen woman—the repre-

sentative to him of all that is venerable in womanhood. Without a word, he put his arm about her and drew her to his side. Sorrowfully, with reflective eyes, they stood for many minutes looking down into the fire in perfect silence.

They knew everything was ended ; to war with the impossible was useless. They must yield, nay, had already yielded and surrendered all along the line. The struggle was over, and not to renew a period of strife were they now met again.

"While we were drinking our wine of life we thought it tasted sweetly," said Wrayburn, "but now we've got to the lees and dregs it's bitter enough, eh, Mary?"

"Why go back to that now?" she answered, in a tone of concentrated bitterness. "All the waves and billows are gone over us, and we're engulfed."

"Oh no, we don't mean to be engulfed," he said gently.

But the very lethargy of indifference had fallen on Mary, and she did not think it worth while to reply.

Wrayburn looked at her anxiously. He could bear to suffer himself, but not to see her suffer. He had intended to say no word about his own grief; to keep whatever reserve of strength was in him for her comfort. But what vestige of real comfort could he find for this poor dispirited creature? and its flimsy pretence was an impossibility.

"All my plans and purposes are broken off," he said, returning to his former attitude, with his head bent down dejectedly upon his arms.

"You will not always suffer as at present," she sighed. "Your strength to bear hard things will come back. And then—I suppose time softens all things; they say Time is the great healer."

Wrayburn shook his head. "They *say* so," he said, "but 'their memorable sayings

are proverbs of ashes.' This is one of the things time cannot heal. It's like the marks of the five wounds which remained after the Resurrection and Ascension. Such marks are never lost—even in the heavenly places."

The forcible illustration made Mary look earnestly at him. His face wore a peculiar expression, as if some glimpse of a deep inner life had become visible for a moment through that outer husk of vague impulses, undeveloped powers, waywardness, and genial faultiness, which concealed, while it suggested, the possibilities of the actual man. The strange contrast of inherent power in his energetic outline with the brooding melancholy in his thoughtful eyes, was eloquent to Mary of a character whose forces were not spent, though they had never been largely revealed.

"Yet you are free," she said, with the womanish propensity for testing and re-

testing the well-known purity of her fine gold.

"I wonder what devil prompts you to stab me with such words?" he said, turning his head slowly to look at her.

"It is perfectly true; you *are* free," she persisted.

"Free by Act of Parliament," he said, standing up straight and turning to her. "But after the vows I took when I put my ring on your hand; after all that has come and gone, do you think I shall ever consider myself free to marry any one else?"

"I should not like to think so," she said faintly.

"Make your mind easy. There is no woman in the world for me but yourself, and there never shall be, so help me God!" He spoke earnestly, but without heat or violence, holding her hands between both his own, and looking down at her with passionate, solemn eyes. "Oh, Mary," he

sighed, "my wife, whom I had intended to make so happy; whom I had hoped to see the joyful mother of my children!"

The very tense he unconsciously used only served to emphasize his feeling of straitness and separation.

Mary's worn face became elevated by an expression of grateful loyalty; but, before she could speak, he loosed her hands and moved away. For low reverberations of the storm he had so recently passed through rolled across the gulf dividing them, and he could not afford to stand and listen. That way lay madness. Let him only go far enough back on that path, and he should find himself in the heart of the storm again. With moody restlessness, he began to turn over the books and papers upon the table. It angered him to feel himself growing weaker while the part requiring most expenditure of strength remained yet to be done.

"If I never read another book until the day of judgment, I should not read *that* one," he said, letting a book slip out of his hands with such quick impatience, that it fell at his feet a mass of fluttering leaves.

Mary glanced indifferently at the ill-used book as he picked it up, and saw that it was a volume of Browning's "Men and Women"—the last book they had been reading together. A faint twilight smile rippled across her wan face.

"Give it to me," she said, holding out her hand. "I think it will be one of my favourite books."

"Oh, it's there, whenever you want it," he said, putting it back upon the table. "I shall leave books and everything of the kind. I'll not take anything away except my clothes; and you don't need to trouble—I can get them together myself."

It was the beginning of the end, and bound to come; but not for worlds would

he have looked into Mary's face as he spoke. The sobbing sigh with which she sat down, and turned away her face, fell heavy upon his heart as the first clods of earth upon a coffin.

"I wish you had never met me!" she exclaimed, with sudden vehemence.

"Why do you wish that?"

"Because I have only brought you disgrace and misfortune."

"There's no disgrace. And as for the misfortune, I suppose that was bound to come, if not by you then by some one else; so what's the use of talking like that?"

She did not reply, and he stood remorsefully regarding her.

"How did Mr. Vanburgh pass the night?"

"Just as you might suppose he would; he's more dead than alive."

"I'll go and see him presently. Is he in bed?"

"Yes; he is weaker than a baby."

For a moment a wild thought whirled through Wrayburn's brain of carrying these two frail, unprotected creatures back to Swanneck with him, and there holding them in security. But he did not utter his thought as he came back and took up his old position.

"Mary," he said earnestly, "before I go away I must have some better guarantee for your safety than I have now."

"My safety?" she said, looking up.

"Yes. You may have all sorts of annoyance."

"It's very likely, and just what I anticipate."

"But there must be some way of preventing that. He has no claim upon you, and the small moral claim that he had has been forfeited by his treachery. Promise me that, whatever happens, you will not return to him."

"No, I will make no such promise."

"You won't? why not?"

"Because," she said, in cold, dry tones, "it is an insult to me even to suppose that I could ever dream of returning now. You are thinking of things that happened before I became your wife. But my marriage with you has altered everything, and you should remember that."

Wrayburn made no immediate reply. He had picked up an empty envelope, and was very diligently scribbling on it a vague series of stars and crosses.

"Women are strange beings, you know," he said at length; "and no one will do such extraordinary things as the woman with a strong sense of duty."

"I shall never again imagine that is my duty," said Mary. "I could not go from one husband to another, as you seem to suppose. I see now what a mistake it was to go to him in San Francisco. I gave him the very opportunity he wanted for working out his infamous plans. Yet indeed I did it

from the very best and highest motives—as I thought—and God knows at what a sacrifice.”

“It is not lost,” he said. “Nothing is lost.”

“Are you not lost to me?” she asked drearily.

“I seem to be now, it is true; but *now* is not everything.”

She passed her hand wearily over her eyes. “Oh yes,” she said, with impatience, “that is what people say—‘we shall meet in heaven,’ and all that. But who knows anything about it, or how long we shall be getting there?”

“I’m not one of those who believe all their work is done here,” he said slowly; “that either heaven or hell is the next move. ‘The kingdom of God is within;’ but it’s very imperfectly built up here. I fancy a good deal of building must still be going on under other conditions. Perhaps you and I shall find again some of the bricks that seem

to be lost—the wasted sacrifices and efforts—and shall then discover the spaces they are intended to fit.”

“Oh, Lawrence!” she faltered, “you have a faith; but I don’t think I have any. All is dark.”

“So it is to me, dear, dark as Erebus. But I should blow my brains out if I did not believe that something stable and permanent was being evolved out of this shifting rubbish-heap of a world.”

His stars and crosses were progressing so satisfactorily that the paper was nearly covered. Something lay in him burning for utterance; but the difficulty of distinguishing what that *something* was, and the inability to disentangle it from the swarm of listless thoughts encumbering him, bound him in unwilling silence. This might be their last meeting in life. Surely such an hour should be memorable by reason of its interchange of solemn thoughts and im-

pressive words. Time was passing ; a hundred things remained to be said. Yet there he stood, making senseless figures on a scrap of paper, driven into a mental *cul de sac* by the very pressure of emotional feeling paralyzing the intellect. At last he threw the paper into the fire, and twirled his pencil-case abstractedly.

"I suppose you'll remain here?" he said, rousing himself.

"Yes," Mary answered. "I shall take up the old life as I did when I returned from America. I'm exactly now where I was then."

"But you won't begin teaching again?"

"Yes; I think it will be better to have something to do."

"And if Mr. Vanburgh died?"

"The house would then be mine. I should still live here."

"The thought of your isolation is what eats into me."

“I shall not be more isolated than yourself. You’ll go back to Swanneck, of course?”

“I suppose so; I don’t see anything else for me. It would kill me with sheer heart-hunger to know I was within a few hours’ journey of you, and yet prohibited from ever seeing you. I could not live in England for that very reason, if for no other. Besides, circumstances might possibly occur that one might be inclined to treat with a certain casuistry. No, it would be too great a temptation; let us have no compromises.”

“You speak as if all depended upon yourself. You leave little margin for any possible resistance on my part,” said Mary, who should have understood men quite well enough to know that they never do leave more than the slenderest margin for feminine resistance. And, remembering how many wrecked lives there are, and how much stronger than a woman’s a man’s moral force

is, and more thorough-going when he really chooses to exert it, practically he is justified in supposing all depends upon himself.

Wrayburn passed over Mary's remark. "That money of Mr. Probyn's," he said abruptly, "is lying untouched in the bank here ; that's all I have to leave you."

"Oh no——," Mary began, when he interrupted her.

"Don't begin to raise artificial objections, Mary, and make more worries. Goodness knows we have enough already ! I never felt my poverty more bitterly than at the present moment."

"What could money do for me ?"

"Not much, certainly—money can't heal bleeding hearts ; and, indeed, I don't know that there's any cure for them. When I write to Ted, I'll ask him to look after you. It will be at least some sort of satisfaction to know you are not neglected. He'll be cut up when he hears of this, for he's fond of

you. I'm going upstairs now, Mary; but I'd rather you did not come."

She heard him go into Mr. Vanburgh's room, and for nearly an hour there was silence, broken only by the low sound of Betty's quavering voice. The poor old woman, sorrow-stricken as she had been all her life by troubles not her own, was trying to comfort herself with "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," to relieve the death-like quietude weighing upon the house.

"On the other side of Jordan,
In the sweet fields of Eden,
Where the tree of life is blooming,
There is rest for you.

There is rest for the weary,
There is rest for the weary,
There is rest for the weary,
There is rest for you."

There was a pathetic touch of confidence in the reiterated promise of rest; and Mary, vaguely listening to the weak old voice, wondered within herself what manner of rest

that may be which "remaineth to the people of God."

After a long time Wrayburn's step was heard in the room overhead, the opening and shutting of drawers and doors, and pulling about of things. These sounds were the dropping of the last sands in her hour-glass. The end was swiftly approaching. Soon the bitterness of death would have been reached and passed, and she would be left alone, confronting the old hard life that would yet be so insupportably new and strange.

Wrayburn's packing must have been of a very scrambling kind, for it was finished with wonderful despatch, and he soon came downstairs. As he entered, his face wore a hard rigid expression from the contraction of the muscles about the eyes and mouth, and his manner had a forced, unnatural composure.

"Mary, I'm going to Liverpool to-night," he said, "but I'll remain there for a week or two; so that if Mr. Vanburgh gets worse

you may send for me, and I will come at once."

Mary looked rather startled. "He is very weak, is he not?" she said anxiously.

"It's not that alone, but people of his age have no reserve of vitality; they slip out of life before you know it. You must be careful of him."

"Can you doubt that I will?"

"I've said good-bye to him, Mary," he remarked, after a pause, standing irresolute, and awkward-looking enough.

"And now you've come to say good-bye to me. Well, that is a word I cannot say. Why should poor creatures be forced to do things beyond their strength? What pleasure can it be to God to see us rent in pieces for just trying to serve and please Him?"

"This is not the time for speculations," he answered, almost coldly. "This is probably the last time we shall ever stand face to face.

That's enough for me just now, and more than I can grasp. Won't you kiss me, or say one last word to me?" For she had cast herself sideways on the sofa, and buried her face in the cushions.

"I cannot—it is *too* hard," she said, in a stifled voice.

His heart swelled as if it would burst asunder, and his lips quivered spasmodically. Though he might quell the inner tumult, the sight of that forlorn figure with the hidden face was more than he could bear. Stooping over her, he put aside her tangled hair, and turned the pallid face round to him.

"You have been my happiness," he said, trying to steady his voice. "Always remember that. I've had it, and it can never go from me, for it's part of myself. Oh, Mary, Mary, Mary!"

She rose, and wound her arms about his neck, pressing him to her, and leaning her forehead against his shoulder.

“My own heart’s core!” he whispered hoarsely, clasping his arms tightly around her, and bending his haggard face above her bowed head. In such an agonized embrace, might two despairing souls extinguish their light of life at the foot of the scaffold. No more words were spoken. They exchanged one burning kiss, took one long last look through a mist of unfallen tears, and for the second and last time they were sundered. One went out into darkness, and one was left behind in darkness ; but each saw the other transfigured by a more than star-lit radiance.





CHAPTER XIII.

FOR six or eight weeks after Wrayburn's departure there was utter stagnation in Mr. Vanburgh's house, the death-like repose of absolute hopelessness. Nothing further was heard of Loxdale, and even his whereabouts was unknown.

When Wrayburn had written to his brother, briefly relating the calamity which had befallen him, the visit to Colonel Wrayburn's father-in-law at Florence had come to an end. He and Christina were enjoying a private little ramble on their own account in Southern Italy before returning home. The letter was forwarded from Florence to Rome,

and lay there until they themselves arrived some weeks later. As soon as Colonel Wrayburn could realize the situation, he lost no time in returning to England, and hastening down to Longbridge. Christina did not accompany him on the latter journey. She experienced a certain embarrassment in dealing with her brother-in-law's affairs. Perhaps, having once ill-treated him herself, she felt that her sympathy with him under any subsequent ill-treatment might be open to the suspicion of insincerity. So she contented herself with simply writing to Mary, sending the letter by Colonel Wrayburn, queen's-messenger fashion.

It cost Mary so great an effort to receive her visitor that he fancied she was cold and formal. Of an emotional temperament himself, he found no difficulty in describing the consternation with which his brother's letter had filled him, or in pouring out to her all his grief and commiseration for them both.

And Mary listened gratefully, though almost in silence. His voice and manner, the expression in his eyes, and his kindly ways, were so alike, and reminded her so forcibly of his brother, that while he was speaking she felt as if in a dream she heard once more that beloved voice, and would fain have left the dream unbroken. After this visit no event of any interest followed for many a weary month. Day succeeded day with placid monotony, each bearing away with it into silence its own portion of Mary's sorrow. There were days of rebellion, of despondent bitterness, of submission, of revived courage, or of sick-hearted disgust at the utter insipidity of all things. These moods were like the variations of an incurable malady, known only to the sufferer. Externally she bore herself with the old proud, uncomplaining patience.

The spring and summer passed, yet nothing was heard of Loxdale. This was the more

surprising, as he had assured Mary there was war to the knife between them. Neither she nor Mr. Vanburgh ever ventured to express their wonder, from the half-superstitious feeling that the mention of his name might break the spell. Nor was Wrayburn's name ever mentioned. Although Mary knew her grandfather had received letters from him, he had used such subtlety in getting those letters that she was supposed to be unaware of them. Every day something fresh presented to her the austere necessity of recognizing her entire severance from Wrayburn. But this rigid self-restraint about the letters seemed like the last straw that broke the poor camel's back. She could grow used to a corroding pain, as a captive becomes used to his prison ; but she could regain no central peace, and a more depressing melancholy than ever settled down upon her.

In the late autumn, as Mary returned one

afternoon from one of her listless, solitary walks, Mr. Vanburgh pointed to a letter upon the mantelpiece. "That came while you were out," he said briefly. She knew the writer's "image and superscription" only too well, and appeared in no great hurry to open his letter, pausing first to take off her gloves, hat, and fur cape, all with great deliberation. When at length she had opened and read it, she handed it to her grandfather. But he put out his hands, and drew back with the same gesture of contemptuous abhorrence he would have used had he been offered some filthy abomination.

"*I* don't want to read it," he said rather peevishly. "What is it now?"

"He says he is ill, and wants me to go to him," Mary replied.

"Oh, of course—the old story. All lies, lies, lies!" And, leaning forward, the old man spread out his tremulous hands

to the comforting warmth of the cheerful fire.

"You won't take any notice of it?" he said, looking up after a long silence.

"I don't know," said Mary. "If he was really ill I would go to him."

"Don't go near him, Mary," he said.

She was very well inclined to take his advice; but when she remembered how persistent Loxdale could be, and reflected that if she did not go to him he might possibly come to her, then her mind wavered. Any such visitation could only be destructive to Mr. Vanburgh in his present weak health. Moreover, the perpetual chafing of her own restlessness disposed her favourably towards any change in the monotony of pain; but it was only after much inner debate, and not a little outer opposition, that she at last determined to go to London.

It was late in the afternoon of the following day when she arrived. Leaving her

travelling-bag at St. Pancras, she set off on foot through a dreary maze of shabby streets to the address in Pentonville which Loxdale had given. When at last she had found the house, Loxdale was not at home. Turning slowly from the door, revolving various thoughts, she decided to look for some inexpensive lodging for herself and return later on. But before she had reached the end of the street she met Loxdale himself. His proximity to a door bearing the legend "Jug and Bottle department," and the fact that he was wiping his moustache with the palm of his hand, suggested that he had been quenching his thirst at a fount that is more popular than the fairest springs of Helicon.

"Hallo!" he cried, stopping short, while a broad smile lighted up his sallow face, "is it you? By Jove! I thought you'd find this last fence a bit too stiff, and balk it. You've a fine spirit of your own, my girl; 'pon my

soul you have. I never thought you'd come."

"What was the use of writing for me, then?" she asked rather sharply, for his *bonhomie* was by no means acceptable. "I only came on the supposition that you were ill; but it seems you are able to be up and out."

"Well, if you were asked where the fount of perennial truth rises, I should hardly think you'd say 'in the breast of Jasper Loxdale,' after the liberal education you've had in——"

"There," she said haughtily, "that's enough."

She turned back with him, and they went on together in silence. When they reached the house Loxdale opened the door with his latch-key, and led the way up to the small, ill-kept, ill-furnished apartment *a la belle étoile* which he occupied. The fire was almost dead, the fireplace choked up with ashes. The bed was unmade, the dingy-

looking bed-clothes hanging over the foot-rail and trailing on the floor. Loxdale wisped these up in a bundle, and removed the clothes and newspapers with which his two cane chairs were encumbered. Next he raked between the bars of the grate, put on a few bits of wood and coal, and finally seated himself in a chair called by courtesy an easy-chair, but whose internal economy was so shattered by a long course of ill-usage, that it contributed any and every feeling rather than that of ease to the sitter.

“Why don’t you take off your things?” said Loxdale, glancing round at Mary, who stood at the table taking a gloomy survey of the room.

“No, thanks,” she said coldly. “There are a few things I brought.” And opening her basket, she took out new-laid eggs, a roast chicken, and thinly cut slices of spiced beef folded in white paper. “Where shall I put them?”

"I dare say you'll find a plate in that cupboard," he replied, looking on indifferently while she arranged the things. "You don't believe I'm as ill as I really am," he observed.

"Yes, I do," Mary answered. "You look ill, and very much changed."

"I've had a bad time of it since I last saw you."

"What have you been doing? Where have you been living?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Not particularly."

"I was doing pretty well with forbidden fruit, when, just after that little bit of melodrama down at Longbridge, the police got wind of it, and I got lagged. I got six months, and only came out a fortnight ago, and came back to my old diggings here."

"What do you mean by forbidden fruit?"

"Literature, my charmer—literature of a certain class, commonly called 'indecent' by

the purists. There's a pretty brisk demand for it at times, when the moral fit ain't on."

A sudden glow of shame and indignation flamed up in Mary's face. "I wonder how much lower it's possible for you to sink in degradation?" she said.

"That's all very fine for you, with a good home, and every comfort," he retorted. "This is a lively-looking sort of a home, now, isn't it?"

"You've followed your own ways all your life, and this is what they've brought you to," she answered sadly. But his comfortless surroundings nevertheless awakened in her a slight compunction. "If you wanted money, could you not say so? You know very well I would have sent you what I could; but you need not have made me bring it to you. I can be no use here."

"Come, Mary, don't begin to lecture. Sit down, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Thank you; I had some tea at the railway station."

"You vicious, unforgiving little devil!" he exclaimed angrily. "There's no more charity in you than in a stone. Look here! I didn't want money. I wanted to see you; and that's why I asked you to come, that I might have a talk with you once more, and see your face before I hand in my account."

"What is it that you have to say?"

"I tell you I haven't anything special to say. It just came into my mind—the strong desire to see you again. You cannot understand that feeling, can you? You wouldn't want to see me once more if you were dying."

"You are not dying."

"Am I not? How long do you think I'm going to lie rotting here, as I've rotted since I came out, as I rotted in the Infirmary all the time I was in? What's the use of a man's life to be spent lying about sick and

destitute and forsaken? I can't get hold of any of the fellows I used to know; they're in such a deuced hurry. Poverty is like the plague, and they're afraid of catching it; and I, for one, don't blame 'em. I've given the go-by to poor devils myself, and would again if I made a lucky *coup*; the slice of cake you get is never cut so thick that you can afford to share it. But I pay 'em out now and again all the same, when I get a chance. I can do an ugly thing or two yet, though I *have* come down in the world, and can't trounce it as I did once. If I can't strike I can still bite, and have left the marks of my teeth in one or two fine popinjays whose memories aren't quite so good as they used to be."

As he spoke he drove his heel into the freshly kindled fire, making it blaze up smartly. The temporary good-humour produced by brandy was beginning to wear off, and the habitual nervous irritability from

which he suffered to reassert itself. Leaning back in the creaking chair, he twisted the ends of his moustache and contemplated Mary.

"You're not looking well, Mary."

"I am quite well."

"Bless me, what an enviable constitution ! Love-affairs not troubling you at all these times ? All tranquil again after that last tidal-wave, eh ?"

As Mary would not speak he rose, opened a drawer, threw about its muddled contents, and presently held up a letter.

"Do you know that hand ?" he asked.

Mary bent her head without saying a word, for, with the sudden confusion of a great surprise, she recognized Wrayburn's writing ; and all her heart's deepest wounds began secretly to bleed afresh.

"You wonder how that reached me, don't you ?" he said.

"As the address is perfectly correct, I

don't in the least wonder," she answered, at once regaining her composure.

"He was here," said Loxdale, intently watching her.

"He went straight to Liverpool," said Mary, with evident incredulity.

"I know that; but the spirit moved him to journey back from Liverpool to see yours obediently."

"How could he find you?"

"Through Scotland Yard, I fancy; but he wouldn't say."

"What did he want?"

"That's just what I don't know exactly, though I'm pretty good at ferreting out men's motives. Perhaps he wanted to examine me more closely, as a naturalist might like to turn back and examine some venomous creature that had bitten or stung him. I don't quite see, so far, what he hoped to gain by coming. If you'll sit down I'll tell you about it."

"No, thanks," Mary repeated.

"You don't care to hear; the subject is not one that interests you?" he said in a jeering tone.

"It's not that; but I must go presently," she replied, with a frantic longing to hear all and an uneasy feeling that she ought not to listen.

"I was sitting here in the dusk, just as I am now, when some one knocked at the door," said Loxdale. "I called out 'Come in,' and in he came, to my great surprise; not as an enemy, yet not as a friend either, I suppose. But, upon my word, I can't make him out. Whether he came on purpose to make me let you alone, or whether he came to induce me to leave the country, I don't know. It's an odd individual. It struck me that he would save my life or take my life by the mere turning of a straw. Anyhow, he sat down in that very chair," pointing to the one Mary had declined, "and

remained here for about an hour. He offered no didactic remarks or good advice, though he offered to pay my passage to any of the colonies or America, if I'd go. But I'm not up to that now. I was in hospital all the time I was in Holloway."

Again he stirred the fire, and leaned over it as if he felt chilly, while Mary stood silent and still as a statue, trying to find excuses for herself. Wrayburn had not suffered by this man as she had suffered; nor had he been abused or deceived to the same extent. But the point of Loxdale's rough rebuke pricked her conscience, for had she not refused to sit down, or break bread with him, or do anything suggesting reconciliation? She did not know the fierce fight Wrayburn had had with himself before he had been able to lower his pride and dignity, and push aside his deep-rooted resentment sufficiently to see Loxdale once more. She did not know the precipitant violence with which

he had forced himself to carry out his purpose before his mind should have time to change. But the intense bitterness of her feelings diminished imperceptibly, and her heart expanded with a broader charity as she thought of his presence in this room, of his forbearing treatment of this man whom, even in his misfortunes, it was so difficult to regard with forbearance. She felt cheered and strengthened by traces of a nobility which restored to her the ideals of her brighter hours.

“Why,” she exclaimed, with such a clear intonation that Loxdale looked up, “you are searching for his motive as if he had some deeply laid design. Can you not see that it is as natural to a large-hearted man to sink himself, as it is for a small mean man to entangle himself with everything paltry and personal?”

“Really! What a fine command of language you have, to be sure!” Loxdale

said dryly. "If you took to the stump you could beat the rest of the shrieking sisterhood into fits. Suppose I'm the small mean man referred to. Much obliged for the compliment. And so our estimable friend had no motive beyond the desire to make himself agreeable? Well, well, I must take to my horn-books and flapdoodle again. It's no use, I see, trying to edge my way through a wicked world until I cut my eye-teeth."

"We all have a motive in what we do, I suppose, but it need not be a selfish motive."

"Oh, don't be prating to me as if I was born only yesterday. I know the world, I should say, a long sight better than you do. The fellow thought if he could just get me shipped out of the country the money would be well spent. He could sit at the head of the table and carve the joint his own way then."

"Is it your presence that prevents him carving it his own way now?"

"What else is it? But he's one of your muddle-heads who think they've got hold of a 'cute idea, only they don't know how to work it out."

"When you generously offered to make a present of me to him, why did he not take your offer then?"

"Because he knew he'd have to pay smartly for it, and he wants to go on the cheap. When he got as far as Liverpool he thought he could make a better move; so he came trotting back to see if he couldn't get me toted off to the antipodes instead of himself. A lump sum down would come less expensive in the end."

Mary almost smiled at the distorted reflection of Wrayburn thrown back from Loxdale's mind.

"It's no use," she said, with a little impatient sigh. "I can't make you see

things in any other way than the way you've accustomed yourself to see them."

"Come, then," said he, "if you're right and I'm wrong, let's have your version."

"I think he simply wanted to hinder you from injuring me."

"How could he hinder me?" he demanded. "What business is it of his? You are my wife, not his. What right has he to screen you from me?"

"He loves me," she said simply.

"And haven't I loved you?"

"You have taken strange ways of showing your love."

"Because you've always gone against me. If you'd been more reasonable and adaptable, we could have pulled together comfortably enough."

"Adaptable!" she echoed slowly.

"Oh no, of course that was not to be thought of. And what has all your high falutin brought you to? You were vastly

glad to be rid of me, and in a tearing hurry to be married again, weren't you? Yet you're neither maid, wife, nor widow this moment. How much praying and groaning, and sighing and crying, have you done since that night when I dropped on you all like a bolt from the blue? And how do you suppose he is consoling himself? I wonder what nymph of the *pavé* is enjoying brevet-rank for the nonce, and keeping your place for you until such times as I drop off the hooks and leave you free to step into her cast-off shoes? You'd have done better to stick to me, after all, and tried to love me."

"What has there been in you to love?" she asked, not scornfully, but with perfect indifference.

"What is there in that other to love? It's my belief you don't know why you care for him yourself. It's just your perversity—the cursed obstinacy that's in you. What a fool you are to fill your face with wrinkles,

and cry yourself blind and bald for the sake of a fellow who will damn you to-day, laugh at you to-morrow, and marry some one else within six months! The beggar's as poor as a rook; hadn't even a home of his own to bring you to, though he was glad enough to hang up his hat in your home instead. And as for looks, any one with half an eye could see that when I was young and strong I was far and away the handsomer man."

Mary made no effort to correct his statements. It was no use, as she had said. In what part of darkness and chaos could she cause light to enter? It seems, indeed, as if the actual punishment of an evil mind lies in the gradual deprivation of all direct sight, or power of lucid thought. Conscious of her own helplessness, Mary stood at the window looking down silently into the grey, dreary street, now pervaded by the gloom of twilight shadows.

“Why did he write to you?” she asked, with some irrelevance.

“There was nothing in it,” he replied, “only a few lines covering a tenner. It seems to have occurred to him to send it after he got back to Liverpool. A sort of buying off, I suppose. The fool! it’s like his impudence. He little guesses the sort of stop-gaps your grandfather has had to use.”

Suddenly he sprang to his feet. “Curse him and blast him!” he burst out violently. “To think I’ve come so low that I should be glad to keep even *his* money! Oh-h-h!” he went on, clenching his outstretched hands and gnashing his teeth, as he strode up and down, making the floor shake and the window rattle, “I could grind all the world to powder, I hate them so. There are days when I lie here thinking I’d give the world and all that’s in it if I could only live over again the good times I used

to have. But there are other days when I can't even see that I ever had such very good times ; I never got what I intended, and generally missed the very things I'd set my heart on. And I don't care a straw about it now, one way or the other. I'm not afraid of God or devil, though the parsons may be right, for all I know. I never disputed their doctrines, or troubled my head about it. It's *Kismet* ; you'll go where you'll go, if there's anything left of you once your jaw drops. Take your wretched eggs and hospital stuff to hell," he yelled with renewed fury, pouncing upon the inoffensive viands and hurling them into the fire. The chicken, rebounding from the back of the grate, fell into the heap of ashes, while the eggs, having first suffused themselves copiously over the bars, trickled upon both chicken and ash-heap. " I, who have lived on the fat of the land, known how to take my ease at mine inn, and tasted every

pleasure life has to offer a man, to drop to this! One chucks me a few coins, one an old coat, another an old hat, and now you bring me the house-scrap.” Then he sat down, and for two or three minutes relieved his over-fraught feelings by demanding a universal ordeal by fire for himself and his neighbours, with the final condemnation and annihilation of things in general. After this hearty invocation of blood, fire, and the powers of darkness, the room literally reeked of brimstone.

Poor Mary had witnessed too many of such outbursts to be in any degree startled. She waited for some time, and when he had calmed down, went over to him as he sat ruminating over the fire.

“Jasper,” she said, “it has just occurred to me that Bessy Barnes is staying here in London now with her sister and brother-in-law. He has a saddler’s shop somewhere in Islington. I think I’ll go and

see if they can give me a room for to-night, and I'll come back to see you to-morrow."

"Bessy Barnes! isn't that the girl I threw the stuff over that night?" he bluntly asked, without hesitation.

"Yes, our old Betty's niece. They would be glad to see me, I know, even if they cannot accommodate me."

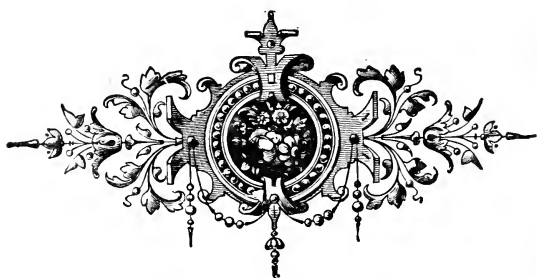
"All right. I'll walk a bit of the way with you. I may as well do the civil while I've the chance."

He threw Wrayburn's letter back into the drawer, and put on his hat.

"Mary," he said, having opened the door and partly closed it again, "I've been rough with you, I know, but give me a kiss before you go."

Involuntarily she drew back, looking at him with astonishment. "How dare you make such a request?" she asked, with chilling severity.

“ Oh, well, if you’re so particular, come along,” he said, brushing past her ; and with a puzzled mind Mary followed him downstairs.





CHAPTER XIV.

MARY passed a sleepless night, and rose early the next morning, intending to make Loxdale's breakfast for him, and show any other little kindness in her power before returning home.

A clock in some room downstairs was striking nine as she knocked at his door. There was no answer from within, and she knocked again ; but as this met with no response either, she tried the door. It was not locked, and opening it softly she looked into the room. The blind was not drawn down, and the bright morning sunshine was

streaming cheerfully in; but the window was unopened, and the room felt close and stuffy. On the bed, which stood immediately opposite to the door, Loxdale was lying fully dressed.

Mary called him by name, but he did not awake, and with rising apprehensiveness she entered. When she reached the side of the bed she stood still, and uttered a shrill, prolonged, piercing shriek that rang and vibrated with terror, and brought eager footsteps hurrying up the stairs.

For Loxdale was dead. He lay with his face a little turned in towards the pillow, his glazed eyes wide open, an awful gash across his throat, and a dark, hideous stain spreading out on either side from the blood that had soaked into the bed underneath his body. A razor lay upon the floor, where it had dropped from his hand, and upon the pillow was a folded paper addressed to Mary herself.

“Mary,” he had written, “I’m sick of ill-luck, and am going to see if there is any better luck in the other world, or if there is another world. It’s no use holding out here. There’s no room for me in this world. Whichever way I turn I’m cornered. I made you both miserable without making myself any happier. I hate and detest him; but it can’t be helped, and you may as well marry him. The only satisfaction I had out of that explosion is the knowledge that I injured him. When I’ve come to such a pass that I’m glad to gnaw the bones he flings to me in the gutter, I think it’s about time I sheered off out of this. He sent that money because he saw my abject poverty; yet I’ve gone through more money in my time than he will ever handle. The last of it is on the table. Give it to an old joker they call Dick the cherub; you’ll find him hanging about the Crown. I owe him three shillings, and let him keep the balance to drink to my memory, since he can’t well drink my health.

“J. L.”

Mary felt sick, and her brain whirled so that the letters danced before her eyes. She understood all now—his wish to see her, and his request for that kiss she had refused. The man had recognized that he was a social wreck, drifted hither and thither

by the tide of circumstance and the surge of his own unhappy mind. As he had been in life so was he in death. Without fear or hope or horror he had knocked at the door of the unknown, demanding entrance, and had gained admission. With the cool blood of a hardened, shallow, insensible heart he had premeditated his own death ; with this secret premeditation had caused his wife to come to him ; had mocked and stung her, knowing it to be their final meeting, prompted by the vindictive jealousy which had no effect in dissuading him from taking his own life, although it was increased by the knowledge that within a few hours she would be free.

Poor, ill-starred brigand, at once beast of prey and parasite, so intrepid yet unfortunate ! Poor, despicable "case of reversion" to the lawless, violent, injurious spirit of feudal times, which brought wealth and territory by its restless aggressions to

the founders of families whose latest descendants are proud to bear high-sounding names conveying largely, idealized associations! The arrogant and powerful mediæval baron, stretched lifeless in blood-stained helm and hauberk before a crowd of serfs and churls, presents to the imagination a fine romantic picture of an impressively heroic figure. Exactly the same predatory instincts and merciless disposition that made the dauntless baron a menace to society in the Middle Ages had made Loxdale a menace to existing society. Yet there was nothing heroic about this poor self-slain man in greatly damaged, second-hand clothing, lying on a blood-stained hard flock bed. He only presented what the newspapers are wont to call "a repulsive and degrading spectacle." Even in death surroundings can do so much for a man : they can actually make us change our whole estimate of his leading characteristics.

Mary's mind reeled with the effort to rush backwards and forwards and grasp every opposite thought at one and the same time. Wild gleams of future probabilities mingled with agonizing flashes of memory illuminating the lurid scene. She was flurried but not faint, though some one was placing a chair for her, and some one else was offering water. For an excited little crowd had quickly filled the room. The people of the house came running first, to utter every sound in the whole gamut of astonishment. Then all the lodgers in the house came to stare at Mary's blanched face and appalled eyes, and to gloat upon the ghastly spectacle. This man, to whom yesterday, in his living, human misery, they were perfectly indifferent, was to-day the most intensely interesting object, as he lay there before them weltering in his own blood. Next came the surgeon, who could do nothing but examine the body and declare that life had been extinct for

several hours. Following him came the police, and, lastly, some wandering reporter, who, having concocted a few lines of "copy," hied him to the nearest newspaper office.

As soon as she had recovered from the first shock, Mary at once despatched a telegram to Mr. Vanburgh, to allay his anxieties on her account before breaking the news to him, and a second telegram to Colonel Wrayburn. The latter had the effect of bringing him to her side as fast as express trains and hansom cabs could convey him. Hasten as he might, it was yet late at night when he arrived and found Mary sitting in the landlady's parlour.

She sprang up when he entered, and seized his hands.

"He has killed himself, like Judas—from remorse," she said, and, breaking down utterly at last, burst into a fit of wild, hysterical tears. The good Ted, who had a most commendable knowledge of the

right thing to do under all ordinary and many extraordinary circumstances, at once removed her from that house of horror, which by this time had become the centre of a sensational excitement to the whole neighbourhood. The landlady, who was experiencing all the pleasure of temporary eminence, was dispensing much beer and gin to her "lady-friends" while rehearsing the tragedy, with a very notable augmentation of detail and enriched ghastliness at each repetition. To a certain class of minds there is no more fascinating enjoyment than these "feasts of the dead."

Christina was at the hotel, and received Mary. She had accompanied her husband to town with the consoling conviction that she was heroically performing her duty. In her opinion, the creation of such a person as this calamitous Mary Loxdale was decidedly a work of supererogation on the part of Providence. Mary Wrayburn was,

of course, quite another thing. This Mary was the one drop of bitter in all her sweet. It was very hard that, just as everything was shaping itself exactly to her mind, all should be spoiled by the introduction of people having such very objectionable antecedents. Many were the uncomplimentary reflections she made upon Lawrence for bringing his family into connection with such an unseemly element. Nevertheless, she was extremely kind to Mary, treating her in all respects as she would have treated one whose footing upon the social ladder was more secure and elevated. And the complacent feeling she had, that such conduct was highly estimable, consoled her under circumstances offering no other consolation.

Poor proud Christina ! She had much to bear when there came, in due time, the coroner's inquest, with its odious sifting of private details. The usual verdict, with its reference to "unsound mind," was not difficult

to arrive at in the present instance. When a man is proved to be without health, or friends, or means, or character, or any home worth calling one, there is surely every reason why he should go out of his mind. If these are not sufficient justification, what further reasons are requisite ?

Then, as the last and worst sting of all, came the newspaper paragraphs with their mock pity and condolence, while disentombing the skeletons of respectable families and reviving the history of unhappy lives.

Christina winced, but bore her pain with fortitude. To have even one's family troubles chronicled in society papers denotes a degree of prominence that has in it something alleviative. Christina was not the only one who winced. Mr. Vanburgh had a pride of his own that was in some respects a family pride too.

When the name of Mary's father was introduced, when his honourable record was

recalled to point a moral as well as adorn the tale, Mr. Vanburgh writhed again. The modest naval captain's services to his country were effectively used as a set-off to the history of that *demodé* dandy. "Adonis Loxdale," of the 100th Hussars, "once well known in sporting and military circles." With a light hand and pungent stroke the story of Loxdale's "good times" was told over again, as to a new generation. Alas, it was only some ten or twelve years since he had "heard the chimes at midnight," and broken the back of *Fleetwings*, and scooped the pool, and made history for his set! so soon is a man forgotten; so soon are his good or evil deeds shovelled up into the dust carts of oblivion and the way cleared for the next procession.

When earth had received all that was mortal of Loxdale, there was a very obvious desire upon the part of all concerned to get away from the last scene in the drama as

speedily as possible. Vainly the Wrayburns tried to coax Mary to return with them to Cornwall. She said to herself bitterly, "Do these people really imagine that when all else fails a visit to Sanclerc can cure every ill?" With the morbid feeling that comes after some terrible tragedy, she thought she would never know happiness again, or cease to see the awful face of that dead man.

"The change of scene would help you to forget, my dear," said Christina.

"I don't want to forget," Mary sighed.

"But you should think of poor Lawrence, and remember justice must be done to him now," said Ted.

"You have promised not to tell him yet," Mary said anxiously, repeating the request she had already made, with an earnestness that puzzled them.

Colonel Wrayburn accompanied her back to her grandfather's house, remaining with

them as a guest for the night. In the morning he and Mary breakfasted alone, for, since his illness, Mr. Vanburgh did not rise till mid-day. When the meal was ended, Colonel Wrayburn pushed aside his plate, and, resting his elbows on the table, leaned his chin upon his loosely clasped hands, looking thoughtfully at Mary.

“In thinking over things,” he said, “it has struck me that perhaps we’ve overlooked one thing, Mary.”

“And what is that one thing?” she said, raising her eyes.

“We have taken it quite as a matter of course that your own feelings have undergone no change—that you are as willing now as before to be married to my brother. And I think there is a touch of insolence, perhaps, in assuming so much, and that we owe you some little apology for the way we’ve formed our own conclusions without consulting you. There is nothing binding you to be re-

married to him simply because you are free."

"Oh, how can you talk in such a way! as if I could possibly change!" she said, a little dawning smile lifting the melancholy corners of her mouth. "You *know* that is nonsense."

"Thank goodness!" he answered cheerfully. "I was afraid that in taking so much for granted we might possibly be getting over the ground a bit too fast. Well, I can't understand your reason for keeping Lawrence in the dark about this. It seems hardly fair to him."

Mary hesitated, and the little half-smile came and vanished again. It was as transient as fleeting sunbeams chasing shadows across a cloudy landscape.

"Well, Mary?" he said encouragingly.

"You can't understand quite all, perhaps, for you have never known what it is to be completely swallowed up by misery," she

said, after a long silence. "It seems to me as if from the very depths of hell I saw heaven at last opening to me. But I must go into heaven my own way. Let the dead rest. Life is over for him, but we have life yet all before us. There is no occasion for hurry. To forget misfortune is not good—at least, not to forget it too soon. If all goes well in the spring, I shall go to Lawrence."

"Go to him!" he echoed. "Why not let him come to you? Far more suitable than for you to go trailing after him."

"No," she said, with quiet decision; "since he was made unhappy through me, and has suffered by me, it shall be my part to requite him generously. To write all about this to him would be no kindness; it would only unsettle him and fill his mind with conjectures. The season is too far advanced for him to travel with any degree of comfort. Let things remain as they are at present. In the spring I will take him by surprise.

We'll have a wedding in Swanneck, and he shall be made happy again in the way he will like best."

"What about leaving your grandfather?" Colonel Wrayburn said, stroking his beard with a thoughtful air.

"Of course I did not make my plans without consulting him," she replied. "We talked it all over together."

"Surely you're not going to settle down in that demented place?"

"Never, while grandfather lives. But after all we have gone through, I should like one quiet summer together—just we two, Lawrence and I—in his own home."

"Oh, Mary," he exclaimed, with a touch of impatience, "I do wish that, instead of yielding to his insane fancy for that horrid place, you'd persuade him out of it, and induce him to take up some rational way of living! It's absurd to think of him wasting his best days there."

“He often told me there was nothing for him here—that he was too old to begin life over again.”

“Oh yes, he talked a lot of the same kind of trash to me. It worries me to see him persisting in such folly. His bread was all cut and ready buttered for him here, and he prefers some wretched husks of his own out there. You speak of his living in his own home. What sort of a home is a log hut to offer any respectable woman?”

“It’s home wherever the heart is,” she answered, a kind of sedate joy manifesting itself through all her mournful gravity.

“The last hope I had was in your influence. I really did hope you might change him,” Colonel Wrayburn said, with the resigned tone of a man who gives up.

Mary was a little inclined to be vexed with him, and to draw comparisons between the two brothers not favourable to the one before her.

"I shall never try to change in him the very things that first attracted me to him. Worldly men are as plentiful as blackberries, but you don't find an unworldly man every day, as I know to my cost."

"My dear, if he would drop a little of what you call his unworldliness, I think you'd stand a much better chance of finding a little comfort and stability in your married life. As it is, I almost tremble to think of it. To me it seems as if he were bent on offering you nothing but the most unparalleled discomfort."

"And as for me," Mary answered, with shining eyes, "the very thought of him brings the most blessed rest and thankfulness and confidence."

"Well, dear, if you're content with the log-cabin style of thing, no one else has any right to complain," he answered meekly.

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